

THREE WOMEN OF FRANCE

By
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AUTHOR OF
" MARY STUART—QUEEN AND WOMAN "

With 24 Illustrations



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PROLOGUE

CATHERINE-DE-MEDICIS, Marguerite-de-Valois, Charlotte de Beaune Semblancay !
Three women, tragically united !

Echoes of Paris, come, repeat the amorous speeches, glad bursts of merry laughter, joyous songs and all the voluptuous tumult of Royal orgies shared by all *three within the Louvre, historic Paris home of the Kings of France.*

Ye silent corridors ; your eloquent air still breathes their amorous wailings, loud rejoicings and deep, melancholy lamentations.

What impassioned vows, what tender reproaches, what dark degradation these three women knew !

The first, Catherine, may be likened to the helmsman of a ship tossing upon the crest of a billow, a snake aboard with head proudly raised above the furious element.

The second, Marguerite, can represent a noble and compassionate woman, shipwrecked in company with the serpent ; and the third, Charlotte, a woman tied to a weeping willow, to receive in her heart the poisoned fangs of the snake.

The exquisite light of moonbeams on the beautiful palace of the Louvre, seat of luxury and opulence, reflect a faery castle, but the penetrating light of deep research mirrors a muddy pool, broken at intervals as the past throws up its dead.

Catherine-de-Medicis was born on the 13th of April, 1519, in Florence, daughter of Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino ; the granddaughter of Lorenzo the

Magnificent and great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Cosimo de Medici—the greatest man in Italy.

The family of Medici, wealthy Florentine merchants in 1314, rose to prominence in 1378, when Salvestro-de-Medicis filled a conspicuous place in the history of the great Tuscan Republic. One of his two sons was Cosmo—from whom descended Lorenzo the Magnificent, the Duc de Nemours, the Duke of Urbino, Pope Leo X, Pope Clement VII, and Duke Alessandro : and the other Lorenzo, whose descendants were Lorenzino—who killed Duke Alessandro,—the Grand Duke Cosmo, and all the rulers of Florence down to the year 1737—when the family became extinct.

The family was contemptuous of legitimacy and nearly all had bastard children—whose lot was magnificent.

Alessandro was the son of Catherine's father by a Moorish slave and became head of the Republic by his marriage with Margaret of Austria—natural daughter of Charles V. He usurped the rights of the legitimate and was later assassinated, with some cause, as an oppressor of the city.

At nine years of age Catherine suffered imprisonment by the Republicans in a convent and the loss of all her possessions. Indeed, she barely escaped with her life, and naturally hated those opposed to Royal authority.

Her alliance with the House of Valois was, in itself, diplomatic craft on the part of the Pope and Alessandro, who promised in return to aid Francis I against his enemy, Charles V of Spain.

Intrigue versus intrigue, dishonest acts, dark plot and counter-plot, surrounded the House of Medici and lay between all the Princes of Italy and Europe in 1533, when Catherine, sole heiress of Lorenzo II,

left Florence for Leghorn with a large following of officials, secretaries and servants. Only fourteen years of age, the Princess, ignorant of her fate, was preceded by men-at-arms, surrounded by a mounted guard and accompanied by the Duke Alessandro and Strozzi—who was to be the head of her household.

Catherine's brilliant suite dazzled even the luxurious French Court, but if the Medici hoped to achieve a match with the Dauphin of France they must have been disappointed that Francis I would give them only the Duke of Orleans, in fear of the "evileye" of his nobles.

Catherine's wealth now equalled that of her relative, Mary Stuart, and eclipsed that of her cousin, Diana de Poitiers : and her wedding feast, continued for thirty-four days, was the occasion for the display of great lavishness.

At the age of thirteen years she was betrothed to Henry, Duke of Orleans, second son of Francis I and Claudia. Francis, cousin of Louis XII—who had no sons—was born in Cognac in 1494, and united the houses of Valois and Orleans when he wed the daughter of Louis, who bore him three sons and four daughters ; his second wife—Eleanor, widow of Emanuel, King of Portugal and sister of Charles V of Spain, not bearing him any children. He was the contemporary of Henry VIII of England, his rival, and patron of letters and of art.

Catherine was transplanted in France at a time when great statesmanship was required to secure the throne against the Protestants, or Huguenots, under Calvin and the Colignys ; and to protect it from the ambitious House of Guise and the House of Bourbon.

Francis I, who met Henry VIII of England on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, was the protector of Catherine at Court, where she learned much of the

treachery between the chiefs of the Catholic party and those of the Republican Calvinists and became herself the personification of craft. Her crafty and dangerous political tactics, playing between those anxious for the downfall of the House of Valois—the would-be Puritan Reformers, the Bourbons and the greedy, headstrong nobles were to save the Crown : her woman's courage, daring and rare statesmanship were to carry to safety the frail craft that carried her children down the stream of life ; for while Catherine lived, a Valois sat upon the throne, royally.

Conspiracy was to darken her life, she was to be called upon to combat attack with attack, cunning with cunning : to stand out among men who saw the creeping doom to Royalty in the Reformation—now, under Martin Luther, Calvin and John Knox, sweeping France and Scotland—as the one with the courage to strike at the enemy though the world condemn her.

This political genius in the bud was a chaste and beautiful young Princess at the time she was betrothed to Henry by her uncle, Giulio—later Pope Clement VII and married on October 28th, 1533 ; and in her flowering she was a sinner—who sinned boldly.

When she was seventeen the Dauphin died, only nineteen years of age, poisoned by arsenic put into a glass of cold water that he drank on leaving the tennis court. The Count Sebastian de Montecucullis was adjudged guilty of this act and sentenced to be torn by horses : and if rumour, which accused Catherine of complicity in an act which made her husband heir to the Throne, spoke truth, she was well repaid in that she never knew the bliss this appeared to promise.

Francis I continued in good health : his third son, Charles, died in 1545 of a pestilential disease, and Catherine's husband, Henry the Dauphin, came under

the spell of the lovely Diana de Poitiers—who was henceforth a thorn in her flesh.

The Court was swayed by Diana in competition with the haughty and deceitful Duchess d'Etampes—whose intrigues, behind the back of her too-tolerant sovereign, were most injurious to France. These two mistresses of Catherine's father-in-law divided his favours and his Court, an early object-lesson to Catherine, whose ponderous intellect was grasping at life.

Catherine's friend in those early days was the Constable Anne de Montmorency, her cousin, who—hated by d'Etampes—was accused by her of a love affair with Eleanor, second wife of Francis I, and banished by him.

Members of the family of Guise, of the House of Lorraine, also cousins, were increasing in power; a rapacious body who, said Francis, would "strip his sons to their waistcoats and the people to their shirts." To them may be ascribed much of the trouble that Catherine was to encounter after her husband's death. Francis repeatedly refused the request of d'Etampes to banish Diana de Poitiers, who came into his life in quite a touching manner.

As the wife of Louis de Breize, the aged Grand Seneschal of Normandy, whom she married when fifteen, Diana had been seduced by Francis I when she went to plead for the life of her father, Count de Villier—accused of conspiring with the Constable de Bourbon and other Huguenots to hand over Francis to Charles of Spain.

Francis had already suffered captivity at the hand of Charles, in Madrid: consequently, he put down this conspiracy ruthlessly. Diana hastened to throw herself before Francis, to beg mercy on an honoured man whose folly tarnished his old age.

A page announced to Francis that a lady requested permission to speak to him.

"What does she want?" the King demanded.

"Sire, the lady is in tears and requests to be permitted to speak with Your Majesty in private."

"And who is the lady?"

"I believe, Sire, she is the Grand Sencschal of Normandy."

"Ah, the fair Diana. I felt certain her filial love would eventually achieve this. Show her in, her desire is mine." His lewd and powerful mind saw that he had her in his hands.

Francis dismissed the courtiers, who retired chuckling and whispering significantly; whereupon the exquisite daughter of Jean de Poitiers was ushered into the Royal presence. Her bright blue eyes were misty with tears.

"Mercy, mercy," she exclaimed, on her knees before the King, who drank in her perfection of face and form, and noted the fair, curly hair.

"Madame, your father is guilty."

"Sire, 'tis the first time. Consider his age and the painful emotions that will be evoked if that fine head rolls on the scaffold."

Francis raised an eyebrow in mock sympathy: "Believe me, Madame, the thought is painful." Diana held forth her shapely white arms in a gesture of appeal.

"Sire, let the devotion of a daughter plead for him."

"I fear 'tis beyond my power."

"Mercy, Sire. The greatest prerogative of a King."

"I would rejoice to exert it, but . . ."

"Yes, Sire."

"You have beauty, that alone can do all."

"What, Sire; independently of your mercy?"

“ The one, Madame, aids the other. How can I refuse what is asked by that lovely mouth, those eloquent eyes, those lily-white hands. Does it not gratify you that your charms win you success ? ”

Diana scarce understood, then a rosy flush spread over her face and she smiled, innocently and happily. “ Then, Sire, I succeed ? ”

The King took Diana’s hand, and as she looked at him his eyes supplicated her, and she knew he sold her the pardon. A shudder passed through her but her courage held.

Her fascinated gaze, comprehending that eloquent glance, told her she must choose between her own compliancy and the King’s refusal. Her father’s life the price of her sacrifice of purity and honour ! She remained till morning, the furtive night changing her into a faithless wife, yet she did not hate the memory. Poor Diana ! Her father was saved, but died soon afterward, while her name was coupled with that of Francis in ingenious epigrams by amorous poets, who sought her favours, which, increasingly, she found herself not unwilling to bestow.

At intervals, Francis sent for Diana and, with the lovely young Duchess de Châteaubriand, she would amuse the waking hours of His Majesty, the two delving into all the intricacies of amorous intrigue as gradually restraint slipped away.

The Duchess suffered for this at the hands of her jealous husband, who shut her up in a chamber hung with black for six months, with only bread and water ; which resulted in her escaping and flying to Bayonne, where Francis received her.

She was eventually banished by the Duchess d’Etampes—who, however, could not get rid of Diana de Poitiers. When Diana’s husband died in 1531, the

blooming young widow settled at Court and captivated the Dauphin: her goodness gone by the board, and a memory that was banished.

Diana was, indeed, bewitching. Small wonder men succumbed to her charm, wit and beauty; which, like an exquisite miniature, reflected in lovely features and complexion, large lambent blue eyes and shapely mouth over pearly teeth, her generous and noble disposition, despite her waywardness.

Her mass of hair, beautifully dressed, crowned her head with a golden halo; her spartan diet enabled her to disguise the fact she was many years the senior of Henry—whose heart knew no greater love after the day the two met in the woods of her home, Anet, and succumbed to four years' amorous fencing.

Catherine quickly lost any attractiveness she might have had for Henry, who gave Diana bountiful proof of his love for her in rebuilding her husband's gloomy Manor of Anet into a sumptuous château, where every piece of moulding and carving bore the initials H. D., Henry, Diana, entwined above the golden crescent that was his symbol; along with the title "Duchess de Valentinois."

A daughter, Diana, was born in 1537, but it is uncertain that it was Henry's, as Catherine's barrenness during ten years led to an operation being performed upon her husband, who was, incidentally, three weeks older than herself.

Catherine's father, early in her marriage, consoled her with the phrase, "*A figlia d'inganno, non manca mai la figliuolanza*," and, prior to Henry's treatment in 1543, Catherine remained childless: but on January 19th her first child was born. A son, he was named Francis: in April 1545 came a daughter, Elizabeth, and once started, Catherine had nine in

fairly quick succession. Claude was born in September 1547, Louis, born in 1548, died in 1550. Charles was born June 1550: Alexander Edward—renamed Henry D'Anjou, in September 1551: and Marguerite in 1553. Another son, Hercules, died soon after birth in 1554, and twins born in 1556 died within two months. Her husband deliberately kept Catherine busy in child-rearing to prevent meddling attention to himself.

Pursuing his passion for the fair sex with a free hand, alighting here and there on conquest bent, like a bee among the flowers, Francis I came to grief.

The greatest connoisseur in the kingdom, his homage was paid only to grace and rare perfection. He took a fancy to a woman in the lower classes, La Belle Feronniere, whose husband, jealous of his conjugal rights, purposely infected himself with a disgraceful disorder, so that his wife might transmit it to the amorous monarch, and earn him a dread revenge.

This she speedily did, nor could Francis rid himself of it; and his life became painful and melancholy, till his death at the Château of Rumbouillet on March 31st, 1547.

Thus, when she was twenty-eight, Catherine's husband now became King Henry II, surnamed *Le Belliqueux*—the warlike—being crowned at Rheims. He, like his father, was brave, generous and lively, and the occasion of their public entry into Paris was marred for him by the public execution of heretics, burnt before the eyes of the Court—a horrid and unnerving spectacle. He himself was ever too occupied with love to take to burning his subjects.

His parliament consisted of 160 magistrates, his army of 15,000 French Infantry, 9000 Germans, 7000 Swiss, 1500 heavy horse, 400 archers, 1200 heavy

soldiers armed with arquebus, 2000 light horse and 200 gentlemen; thus he could afford to ignore military aggression and divert his fancy where he pleased.

Catherine, the possessor of many talents, lacked principle; her thoughts and aims were to centre, at all costs, in herself and the powers representative of the material interests of the Crown, the nobility and the Priesthood,—against the annihilation of Royalty and Religion by Heresy and its false science; but it was Diana who ascended the Throne with Henry II. The Duchess d'Etampes was banished and into Diana's lap luxury and power poured.

The King was openly faithful to her until she herself gave him cause to believe she had another lover, and he then amused himself with other ladies, one of whom was Mary Fleming, who was conducted to France with tragic Mary Stuart, the betrothed of his eldest son, Francis. Catherine watched with bitterness the succession: her jealous possessiveness never lessened, but she took no pains to divert her husband's affections toward herself. She waited for him to plead for what she did not trouble to make attractive, and when she was finally to discover that in child-bearing her husband kept her out of his affairs, she turned on him, and herself indulged in amours with any who took the trouble to lay siege to her emotions. She was fast learning all the arts of successful diplomacy. The Admiral de Coligny, a cousin of Montmorency, was only one of the many noblemen at Court who professed the Protestant religion. The Protestants, or Huguenots, were constantly in competition with the Catholics—who resented their demands for the right to pursue their own form of worship and to be reinstated as judges and municipal officers.

The friction was not lessened when these objects

were achieved ; indeed, it became worse. Huguenots were frequently murdered by Catholics, Catholics by Huguenots, and the religious troubles, that had appeared to die down, again became prominent. Thousands of Huguenots who had disbanded were gradually reassembled, and Catherine, perhaps of all the Court, was most acutely conscious of the menace they afforded.

She watched the trend of events, while rearing her children ; storing up knowledge for future use, and in time she was rewarded. In the apogee of Diana's glory, she fell ; and Catherine came into her own.

Diana's royal lover died on July 10th, 1559, from the effects of an accident at a tournament, held on June 29th, 1559, in honour of the marriage of Henry's sister with the Duc de Savoie.

While jousting with Montgomery, Captain of the Guards, the lance of Montgomery was shattered upon Henry's armour and a splinter passed through his eye to the brain.

"The memory of a dead King never protects the surviving object of his love." Diana retired upon the curt demand of Catherine, to Anet—there to spend her remaining years in pious works and almsgiving until her death on April 22nd, 1566.

Meanwhile, Catherine raised the head she had so long bent beneath the all-powerful yoke of Henry's mistress and soared to the height of her power as the Queen-Mother, the eldest of her four sons—Francis, aged only fifteen and a half years—succeeding to the Throne as Francis II.

In 1558, a year before he succeeded to the Throne, he had taken Mary Stuart, of Scotland, aged sixteen years, to wife. He was of a sickly constitution, a King without a vice, and he and his wife, Mary, were

ruled by Catherine and the Duke de Guise and his brother, the Cardinal Lorraine—who jointly made the young King and Queen responsible for cruel measures against the Huguenots or Heretics, whom Catherine wrongly suspected of a hand in the death of her husband. This was to stand against the tragic Mary Stuart at a time not far distant.

Catherine organized a system of persecution so relentless as to create a state of Civil War in the name of Religion, and was planning an edict forbidding all public worship excepting that of the Catholic Church. Her measures led to the Huguenots enlisting Switzerland to aid them, to counteract which she appealed to Philip of Spain, and the contagion spread until the whole of France became the prey of dissension and outrage. Plots and counter-plots were rife, as each sect strove to outwit and outdo the other, and terrible measures were to be necessary before any sort of lasting peace was to be achieved.

On the death of Henry IV the Bourbon Monarchy was to be firmly established, but much was to be suffered ere that time. The first mutterings of the religious storm became distinctly audible after the conclusion of the peace of Cateau-Cambrés in April 1559, and quickly grew in strength.

At the death of Henry II the active Huguenots or Lutherans numbered 40,000, and at a meeting of the States-General at Orleans in 1561, when the Chancellor l'Hôpital tried to mediate between the two religious parties, Catherine aided him.

By the edict of January 1562, the Huguenots received legal recognition, despite the hostility of the nobility, clergy and lawyers—who saw that political and religious reform were inseparable.

On March 1st, 1562, Francis, the Duke de Guise,



JOHN KNOX CO-LEADER OF THE HUGUENOTS



CALVIN SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE HUGUENOTS

caused sixty Huguenots to be massacred at Vasse ; later, a greater number at Sens—when a company of men, women and children was attacked while assembled for worship ; and all were massacred and thrown into the River Yonne—prelude to three religious civil outbreaks of hostility.

The Huguenots secured the alliance, temporarily, of Elizabeth of England, by conceding the cession of Dieppe and Havre, and in October 1562 the Catholics retaliated by capturing Rouen, where the unstable Anthony of Navarre, father of Henry of Navarre, died of his wounds during the siege. Henry's uncle, the Prince de Condé, was captured in the December at the battle of Dreux ; Marshal St. André was killed and Montmorency imprisoned. Coligny, in 1563, captured several Normandy towns, and in their determination to annihilate all traces of the idolatrous worship of the Papists, his followers sacked many a fine edifice.

At Orleans they burst into the ancient Cathedral and destroyed the altar : they broke the statues, burned the finely carved woodwork of the screen and pulpits and profaned the tombs : and extended their work of destruction to Rouen, Poitiers, Cléry, Caen, Lyons and Bourges.

Coligny being blamed for this wanton damage, his effigy was publicly hanged and both sides seethed with hatred of the other.

Vengeance was taken freely, and on February 18th of that year, Francis de Guise was assassinated by a Huguenot spy—J. Poltrot de Méré,—relative of Renaudie, who was hung on the gibbet at the massacre of Amboise—at the siege of Orleans, while hostilities had ceased.

On March 12th, 1563, this first civil war ended with

the pacification of Amboise, and Condé and Montmorency were exchanged.

Catholics and Huguenots now united against England, and the English were driven from Havre ; but on April 13th, 1564, the Treaty of Troyes re-established friendly relations between England and France.

In September 1567, the conspiracy of Meaux led to the second religious war ; when, at the indecisive battle of St. Denis, the Constable Montmorency was killed. This led to the edict of Longjumeau in 1568.

The Cardinal of Lorraine now planned to seize Condé and other Huguenot leaders ; thus in September 1568, the third civil war broke out, backed by Catherine. The Chancellor retired in 1568, Catherine revoked the edicts of toleration won by the Huguenots and on March 13th, 1569, the Battle of Jarnac terminated with the death of Condé. The Admiral de Coligny now became the leader of the Huguenots ; who, at the Battle of Moncontour on October 3rd, were signally defeated though left in possession of La Rochelle.

On August 8th, 1570, the peace of St. Germain was achieved, whereby the Huguenots gained liberty of conscience, the right to hold certain towns as security for two years, and to hold their services in two towns in each of the twelve provinces for a like period.

This was a shelving of the real settlement, and meant that in two years the whole question must again be raised and reconsidered. Catherine was in deadly fear of Spain, even while maintaining friendly relations with Philip, her son-in-law, and the Duke of Alva—the terrible Lieutenant through whom thousands of Heretics perished by burning, the sword and the rope ; and thus she pandered to the desires of Spain.

Catherine hated Mary Stuart for her friendship

with Diana, who was her foster-mother in France ; and, as the Queen-Mother, she rendered the names of Mary and Francis despicable by tricking them into the massacre of Huguenots at Amboise. Alternating with political intrigue, she devoted herself to her favourite art—architecture.

She built a new wing on the Louvre, started the Palace of the Tuileries, added a grand gallery to Chenonceaux, and some superb panelling to Blois : and was entirely responsible for the building of those superb habitations, the Châteaux of Monceaux and Chaillot.

Of portraits she acquired a marvellous collection ; 460 were in the Louvre alone.

In one room, eighty-three six-inch portraits were empanelled ; vases of jasper and porphyry, carvings of crystal and coral and busts of bronze and antique marble were everywhere lavished. Coffers, beautifully carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, rivalled German cabinets inlaid with silver : she had curio cases of ebony inlaid with ivory and chandeliers of silver, and much jewellery.

Her luxurious taste decorated cushions, bed-covers and canopies of rich satin and velvet, with pearls : she loved the tapestries of Flanders and had many, wrought with gold and silver.

Turkish, Persian and Egyptian rugs she had innumerable ; also fans, hangings of cordovan leather, tables inlaid with porphyry and marble statuettes.

Of beautiful Limoges enamels she had two hundred and fifty-nine pieces ; Indian and China crystal glasses and cups of carved agate and lapis-lazuli.

Thus she occupied herself during the three years Francis and Mary were wed, and when her son died, Mary Stuart was driven out of France by Catherine's hatred—to fall under the feet of her kinswoman—

Queen Elizabeth of England. She was languishing in prison in England, sick and heartbroken, while over her head English statesmen intrigued to bring the hapless and unfortunate woman to the block.

Catherine, a woman of exceptionally hearty and luxurious appetite, presented a slightly bloated aspect, and, having very strong mental and physical forces, was finding in scheming the expression of all that had been repressed and thwarted in her nature during her husband's lifetime. She now ruled as he had ruled her, ruthlessly.

Catherine's second son, Charles IX, married to Elizabeth, daughter of Maximilian II, the Emperor of Austria, was of weak and fiery nature, and he was much disturbed by the discovery of Huguenot plots and seriously alarmed by the construction of personal danger put upon them by Catherine—who was using both the fact of the plots and the fear of Charles to bring to successful conclusion her own plans for the total extermination of the Huguenots.

Charles was neurotic and took a morbid pleasure in the sight of blood. He was known to have thrown a live mule to the lions kept in the Château of Madrid, and to have set his dogs to destroy a cow. His profanity made him the worst swearer in France; and Catherine knew she had a big task to successfully control him and bend him to her wishes.

Her first move was to secure the presence in Paris of the scattered leaders of the Huguenot party, so that they should share the grim fate of the Huguenots resident in Paris; and this she intended to be achieved by the marriage of the King's sister, Marguerite-de-Valois, to the head and chief of the Huguenot party, Henry de Bourbon, King of Navarre:

On June 6th, 1572, the Admiral de Coligny entered

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS
1542-1563



MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

FRANCIS II OF FRANCE, ELDEST SON CATHERINE
DE MEDICIS

Paris with three hundred horse : a man who well deserved his cognomen, "Man of Iron." His mother had been lady-in-waiting to the Queen of Francis I, and Catherine was, in those early days, very friendly towards him. In his attempt to win Charles away from her after thoroughly upsetting France with his support and furtherance of the Huguenots, he increased her dislike to hatred. He rode, at the head, proud and dour : behind him Henry of Navarre and his cousin, the Prince de Condé, had one thousand in train.

Coligny had just returned with Henry, Duke de Montmorency, a great friend of Mary Stuart, from England, where they had been negotiating with Elizabeth regarding her marriage to the Duke D'Alençon, Catherine's youngest, ill-favoured son.

It was hoped this match would add power to the Protestants, and Admiral Coligny's first act was to get Charles to agree to a Huguenot levy of five thousand men, under the pretext they were more fighters to Charles' need.

Catherine smelled danger, for she knew the Huguenots longed to usurp her power.

The King of Navarre, having come to Paris to meet the lovely Marguerite, was residing with a few friends in the Louvre. Lodged in the town were the leaders of his party, excepting La Rochefoucault, who was placed at the other end of the Louvre : De Mouy—first lieutenant to the Admiral—and his son, the young Prince de Condé, Teligny and the Admiral Coligny himself. The ardent reformer had been accused of being responsible for the death of Henry's father, the famous François, Duke de Guise, for which he was to suffer whether guilty or innocent.

The Count de Clermont, and numerous other Huguenots, also, had apartments in the town, and

Catherine, conscious of the enmity of the opposing parties, worked to keep them from each other's throats, until, the marriage accomplished, she would direct the aim of the Catholics upon all Huguenots.

For their amusement she provided a bevy of charming and facile beauties, a girl battalion who disported frail and lovely persons through banquet and dance, both public and private, at Catherine's command. Needless to say, the Huguenots employed similar tactics when entertaining Catholics.

"My maids," boasted Catherine, "are the best auxiliaries of the Royal army."

The amorous suite, indeed, served her as an instrument of influence and government, and a means of corruption. These girls entertained the visitors while the King amused himself with his favourite hounds, and treatises upon hawking. His sole comfort, beyond his only daughter of two years, was his beloved Marie Touchet, a sweet girl of eighteen with flowing golden hair, who had loved him ere she knew he was King and had borne him a son. The King's sole happiness lay in these two and often he reflected upon his conquest of the lovely creature. Stung to love and desire by his first kiss, she had resisted with all the strength of her nature. "No. No. I must not, cannot, love thee,"—then, as she melted in his arms she had whispered, "Let me be good ; oh, let me be good." His heart had contracted in pity : but desire, urged on by love, made him pitiless. "'Tis not bad to love me, child. I am a loveless man ; give me the gift of your love. What is your purity worth if it denies me the food I faint for, if it drives me forth to fall into less worthy arms. Be mine—in the quiet of the nights : and let me teach you the meaning of life." Again she had denied him, with tears running



ADMIRAL GASPARD DE COLIGNY



HENRY DUKE DE GUISE

down her cheeks : and again he whispered : “ ’Tis not your body alone I seek. I could have my choice of beautiful bodies at any time in return for a smile, a jewel, or the crooking of my little finger.”

Then again : “ In you alone I find entire satisfaction : be kind.” Humbly he had knelt at her feet and touched the spring to her heart. Her arms, closing about him, had given him the answer he needed and he was truly happy.

Her house was at the end of the Rue Garnier-sur-l’Eau, in the Rue de la Mortellerie, an isolated little house set like a flower in a garden behind high walls. Here was Charles’ Eden, his angel and bastard child, the famous Duc d’Angoulême, who would have suppressed four Kings if legitimate.

Henry d’Anjou, the next heir, had wed Marie of Poland, after flirting with the idea of wedding Elizabeth of England, who was twenty years his senior : and he was torn between desire to reign in Poland and fear of losing the Throne of France should Charles die in his absence, which—from his almost apoplectic state of anger when he was crossed—might occur at any time.

François d’Alençon, who had taken his brother’s place in suing for the hand of Elizabeth, in despair of gaining either that Throne or the French, intrigued with the Protestants to replace his brother on the Throne of a Protestant France, while lacking the courage to take it upon himself to achieve it.

Catherine’s eldest daughter, Elizabeth, had wed Philip of Spain—who was plotting to reinstate Mary Stuart.

Claude, or Renée, was the Duchess of Lorraine : and Marguerite, ah, what words can describe the beauty of this pearl of France ? Only eighteen, she ranked with the most splendid beauties the Court had

ever boasted : she was an authoress and had many poems to her credit, an indication of the quality of her mind.

Intelligent, but not yet fully awake to life's cruel realities, she was like a flower, budding in the sun. She was friendly with Charlotte—granddaughter of Count Louis de Semblancay the unfortunate, who for fifteen years administered the State finances for Francis I, who held him in high esteem and called him " old father."

On the occasion of the expedition against the Milanese, the monarch set aside certain money to support his army in Italy, which sums were embezzled by the King's mother, the Regent, during his absence.

The expedition failed owing to lack of money, and Francis demanded an explanation. The Count declared he had paid the money to the Regent, the Princess denied it and a commission having declared him guilty, he was condemned to be hanged at Mont-faucen, and such of his property confiscated as would pay the amount of which the Treasury had been defrauded.

The Château de Semblancay was one of the few possessions remaining in the unlucky man's family. Charlotte, like many another young woman who has only beauty to commend her, having married an old man, turned her attention to seducing young ones. Sadly disillusioned in marriage, her vivacious temperament gave her the courage to look beyond it.

Thus, during the period of which we write, these three women lived and loved, planned and dreamed ; life's little day, for each, the constant round of intrigue within the ancient Palace that had seen so much endeavour blown away—like the ephemeral flower, snatched by the wind of Fate.

THREE WOMEN OF FRANCE

CHAPTER I

CATHERINE PLANS

"If you must sin, sin boldly."

ON one night, early in August 1572, the narrow windows of the ancient Paris Royal residence, the Louvre, showed brilliant against a darkening sky, across which, driven by a gusty wind, black clouds scudded, alternatively obscuring and revealing a myriad of stars. The towers were nearly lost in the obscurity of the night ; the ancient pile, with its pointed belfries and draw-bridges, soon would mingle with the greater blackness. It was one of those nights when the elements war : when the wind howls with a sound reminiscent of winter, when nature seems in turmoil.

The home of the Kings of France, and scene of many a rare festivity, was presided over by Catherine-de-Medici, the Queen Mother. The King, Charles IX, was in residence, attended by a numerous and brilliant suite ; playing host to his family, friends and a company including all the illustrious heads of the Huguenot party. France was undergoing the stress and turmoil evoked by the antagonism of two opposing religions ; conferences and edicts having rendered both sides more bitter.

The Catholics, following the King and Catherine, who thus far ruled him, resented the attempts of those of the reformed religion to win a place and a hearing in France. The Huguenots had suffered innumerable vexations and yielded towns in their endeavour to gain an advantageous peace, without avail.

Catherine, a dominant and scheming woman whose life was one long course of perfidy, bore an implacable enmity toward all that the Huguenots represented, for she had watched their scheming for years.

Jealous for her religion, the Throne and her children, she hated the concessions she was forced to allow the powerful nobles who professed the Protestant religion : and in her mind was shaping a dastardly plot that was, alas, in its fruition, to place an indelible stain upon the escutcheon of France. Paris was scarce awake to the joy of another night, but birds were asleep and lovers walked the broad avenues : while, within the Louvre, festivity was at its height. The magnificent, opulent rooms were thronged with laughing ladies and cavaliers. The visitors were being entertained royally within the wide scope of Catherine's vision, like flies sporting under the eye of the watchful spider.

Henry of Navarre, toying with the idea of Catholicity from policy, was in process of being seduced by the loveliest of Catherine's maids, Charlotte de Beaune Semblancay, wife of Baron de Sauve, who had excited in his mind a passion that was to burn herself and to drive her doting husband to attempted murder.

The luxurious rooms of the Louvre were brilliant with the lights of innumerable lustres that sparkled and shed a million rainbow hues. The whole interior,

furnished with the splendour of wealth and artistry, made a fit setting for the illustrious company.

Everywhere the eye rested upon richly gilt carving and noble sculpture. Every panel and wainscoting masters had decorated with all the nymphs and satyrs of mythology. Silk hangings and beautiful tapestry bordered with gold made richly sombre backgrounds for exquisite furniture ; cabinets, *escri-toires*, tables, closets, *bahuts*, *tabulums*, *chauffe-doux*, and hangings, all being of the richest and most costly.

Divans and chairs, covered with velvet or crimson satin, made bright touches about the apartments, mirrors were lavish in prodigality, and rare perfumes from the East, burning in vases, outrivalled the scent of massed roses.

The night had merged into morning ere, gradually, the guests sought repose. In two's and three's they made their excuses, politely hiding yawns that marvellously disappeared once outside the room. Each one had his own private reason for terminating the enjoyment, and Catherine herself had much to do when at last she stood alone in the reception chamber.

The turmoil of the night matched the inward strife in Charlotte—as she left the Louvre by the wicket gate with her maid, *La Dariole*, and made her way to the house of Rene, Court Astrologer and *Parfumeur* to the Queen Mother.

The house of Rene was situated in the Pont St. Michael, and in the midst of the row of old houses on that bridge it was remarkable for many reasons. Those right and left were empty, the occupants long since scared away. Abominable odours were exhaled from the noxious poisons he concocted, and a weird

blue light, ever and anon, shone from the heavily barred window on the first floor, under the overhanging roof.

Under this window and just above the door was a frieze bearing the words—"Rene, Florentine, Perfumier to Her Majesty, the Queen-Mother." Groups of devils in grotesque postures, thereon, made the passer-by shiver and cross himself.

Such was its owner's reputation that few cared to pass it after dark, fearing the coming to life of the specimens and mummies which the house contained ; or the figure of Rene himself, tall, bowed and sinister, suddenly springing upon them from the shadows ; but the Baroness had no fear of Rene's abode, nor felt a qualm as she passed under the arched entrance and made her way up the gloomy staircase, closely followed by her maid.

Her mind revolved about the recent order she had received from Catherine, and her lip curled as she reflected that to her mistress, and "master"—Catherine—she was not a woman with a soul, a heart or a conscience, but a pawn in a game. Deep in her heart she hated the life she led, hated Catherine and all the men with whom she had betrayed her highest instincts as they had betrayed secrets of others—all for gain : she to earn the lavish allowance, home and protection of the Queen, others to gain their heart's desire, her body, for a few fleeting seconds. How far, she reflected, is life from what one dreams !

How worthless, to the world, is virtue and all the sweet ideals that youth builds about it like a rampart, only to be torn down by the ruthless hands of the despoiler.

Yet woman must live, must eat, and wear clothing, and if one must go to *some* man, then in the name

of common sense let it be where good return will be made, she thought.

Charlotte aimed high, for the sin is no worse if committed with a King than with a coster. Thus she reflected, as she stepped within the gloomy residence of the arch intriguer, Rene.

An old hag of a woman awaited their coming. She was yellow of skin and bent almost double. A matted shock of faded hair hung about her face, witchlike ; she was toothless and held a lighted taper in one skinny hand. She shuffled forward as they paused at the head of the staircase, a sly grin distorting her features, then she led them along a passage and held back the door curtains to allow them to enter the room beyond. This room was gloomy as a vault and contained two partitions ; being divided across by hanging tapestries, slightly parted in the centre to reveal in the rear partition a long couch and a carved, shelved cupboard—supporting bottles and vases and a silver lamp, whose scented oil gave a dull yellow light.

This cupboard was a most ingenious affair. Attached to a secret door used only by Catherine, it was pierced with spy holes so that she might perceive Rene's visitors without their being aware of the fact.

Catherine often made use of this means of spying upon those she suspected : and at times, when Rene was not helping her by drawing out unsuspecting clients, he found himself uncomfortably conscious of a sensation of being watched by Catherine's flinty eyes. He had, indeed, to use extreme caution, lest she unexpectedly paid him a visit, and caught him indulging his own desires instead of hers.

The front compartment, of which the curtained entrance was on the left, contained the alembics ; all

the preparations and instruments of the alchemist and necromancer.

Near the doorway stood a small chair, at a table, upon which was a bottle ; to the right of the room and near the window was a table laden with ancient volumes, on top of which lay an astrological chart and a divining wand or rod—with which Rene traced the stars.

On the floor were a stuffed bat, a serpent and a sarcophagus—resting on three trestles—in which lay the mummy of an ancient Memphian, whose brown cerements, having rotted, disclosed a grinning countenance.

A naked sword, an hour-glass and a large kind of bath, filled with water giving off a strong odour of garlic, completed the furnishings dimly to be perceived by the aid of two tapers burning on either side of a rough-cut magical mirror, set in a wooden frame standing on the floor.

This latter was a remarkable object. In it Rene was said to be able to see what was going on at any given place : and, indeed, when events portended, he would draw about it in red chalk a double circle six feet in diameter, its inner verge heavily inscribed with hieroglyphics and set at intervals with skulls of men long dead, which were stored in the cupboard.

On a black stool Rene would sit peering into the mirror with his legs elevated at an angle of forty-five degrees, muttering spells and concentrating : and presently in the mirror he would see the object of his thoughts and the danger that threatened either there-to or therefrom. A man in danger of death from injuries caused through daggers being plunged into a miniature wax replica of himself, could be immersed in the bath at the crucial moment and thereby saved.

Obscene birds were there and many books ; and, in the centre of the room, a built-in brazier gave off an intense blue flame and cloudy whirls of thick smoke.

The Baroness paused inside the doorway and threw back the hood of her long black cloak, revealing in the dim light a face of misty beauty. Glorious fair hair, dressed in the prevailing mode, crowned her dainty head : her face, though pale and distraught with secret cares and worries, was, even so, enough to draw any man. The bright blue eyes could glow with animation, the mouth, so shapely and divinely child-like, could reveal pearly teeth in a dazzling smile.

Her dainty features and bewitching air of innocence had drawn many a man almost against his will, for these attractions were but the bait for the unwary, a mask for the calculating, worldly-wise mind of Catherine's paid tool ; who, at Catherine's request or her own desire, indulged in amorous intrigue to an extent that had rendered her notorious.

The true nature of the Baroness was revealed in the shape of her eyes. Great, lustrous orbs, with heavy lids, they held a world of knowledge, good and ill ; and, in certain of her moods, much that was sensual and cunning. Despite her youth—she was only twenty-one years of age—she was the smartest and most adroit of Catherine's battalion in extracting knowledge from certain men. She had all that a woman could desire of jewels, adulation and position, yet there were times when moods of deep depression made all worthless to her, when she craved for the decent semi-obscurity that had been hers before Catherine made her a spy and worse.

Often she regretted the tendency in herself to value these outward signs of well-being to the peace of an

unsullied mind, but she was fast in the web and could not escape. Her visit to Rene's was of importance, since she felt that terrible events were portending at Court, had doubts of her own safety and hoped that Rene might allay her fears—the nightmare fears engendered by her own conscience and Catherine's purposeful demeanour.

Her faithful and devoted maid, La Dariole, looked anxious as she, too, slipped back her hood ; then assisted the Baroness to the chair, where she unbuttoned the collar of her cloak, revealing her white, rounded throat. The purple gown was low-cut and revealed twin mounds that were her breasts, sharply outlined. Her tiny waist was in startling contrast to the billowing folds of her skirt—which hid as dainty a foot as all France could show, next to that of Marguerite-de-Valois.

As the Baroness sat down, Rene emerged from the rear partition ; his keen eyes under their bushy brows at once comprehending the anxiety expressed in the pose of the Baroness, and himself not unaware of the cause of it. His loose, trailing black robe with wide, hanging sleeves, bore upon the breast the constellations ; the moon and sun gleaming silver and gold upon the sombre material.

A glittering round turban adorned his head, upon his feet were long shoes tapering into curving points and he rubbed his hands together as though in satisfaction, a peculiar mannerism which he had. Rene bowed low to the Baroness as she rose ; made an imperative gesture to La Dariole to remain where she was, then led the Baroness to the brazier.

Picking up his divining wand, he proceeded to invoke from the brazier an apparition—a whirl of thick smoke which, in the bright glow, had the appearance

of a wraith rising from the tomb before the fascinated gaze of the Baroness. She turned pale, closed her eyes and shuddered. Rene's voice broke the spell.

"Madame, the future looks dark and threatening. That figure, I doubt not, is dear to you—not as you saw it just now in spirit form, but animated by youth, health and the pleasures of a licentious Court. Beware, beware."

"Oh, no," the words burst from her pale lips as the Baroness turned appealingly to meet the mournful shake of Rene's head.

"The fourth constellation has indicated in the near future a terrible and bloody catastrophe. I have seen, also, in the constellation Sirius—which influences the heart—an indication of evil omen; and in that of Orion—which influences the left hand—a movement which indicates death."

He paused, while the Baroness drew a deep breath and faced the worst.

"Can nothing dispel the black cloud which hovers over me, ready to descend?"

"These events may, in certain circumstances, be avoided. The constellation which displays the long stars is pure, it indicates that a return to reason may save you."

"A return to reason?"

The Baroness scrutinized Rene's features. He avoided her direct gaze and she knew in her heart that Rene was, in a roundabout fashion, warning her; telling her that he knew that her feet were set contrary to the will of the terrible Catherine, who would not tolerate the slightest disregard for her wishes but who, indeed, carried them through with a patience and a craft that knew neither time nor flagging.

A shudder shook the Baroness as she visualized the

Queen Mother, as she had often seen her, in anger ; a burning spot of colour in each cheek lighting up her pale face, her eyes blazing with a demoniacal light of hatred, teeth set grimly under grimmer lips, hands clenched and bosom heaving. She was set upon a path which, if known to Catherine, would invoke her most furious anger, but she hid her feelings and conjured up a smile as she asked, lightly, " Can you give me no indication regarding the prognostics to which you have given utterance ? "

" Whence they come I see not, unless you have unwittingly incurred hatred where once you received friendship. Look deep into your heart, search for the cause."

The Baroness bit her lip in perplexity, aware that Rene meant to tell her nothing definite and wondering how much was known of her own secret plans. Conscious how perilous her path, she made a last effort to provoke some sort of clue from the man who held the secret of almost everything which happened in a Court teeming with intrigue of every sort.

Sudden deaths, disappearances, and illnesses to which no one else could describe any reason nor prescribe any cure, were very plain to Rene, responsible for most of them. Stretching out her shapely hand, as though for protection from the dark menacing shadows she visualized closing in relentlessly about her helpless form, she spoke—pleadingly.

" Tell me more, Rene. Help me to surmount the anxiety and dread which fill me with dismay. I know whence cometh the threat of danger, I believe ; and would have you tell me how best I may overcome it. By a change of policy or——" she broke off as Rene interposed, hand raised to enjoin silence.

" Rely upon your skill in plying the nimble wits for

which you are so famed at Court and which make you so valuable an auxiliary of Her Majesty."

He paused, while the Baroness waited tensely and La Dariole leaned forward in her desire to hear all ; then resumed.

"A woman may help you, it is indicated ; a young woman—too young to be the Queen herself ; and that is all I can tell you."

He stepped back and replaced his rod upon the table, then, with a half-bow, indicated the reading was at an end.

The Baroness drew from her finger a valuable ring and held it out to him.

"Please accept this jewel in place of coin and as a token of my confidence that you will stand my friend in the event of trouble befalling me. And now," smiling tremulously, "bring me a pot of paste, which I require."

Rene took the ring and indicated that the Baroness be seated. He retired to the rear compartment, where he scrutinized the fine diamond by the light of the lamp and saw with satisfaction the beautiful stone scintillate and glow ; then commenced the concocting of a patent face cream which was much sought after by all the ladies of the Court.

Meanwhile, the Baroness sat down and closed her eyes and La Dariole, released from the spell of Rene's presence, darted to her side, her anxiety for her mistress covered by a desire to cheer her, to make her smile and cast off depression.

"Never let it be said Madame minded a gloomy forecast."

"'Tis gloomy, indeed ! Mordieu," biting her lip with vexation. "Rene is marvellously knowing, but hides his knowledge well. "Too young to be the

Queen," he said. "That means, beware the Queen. Now just what can she know to cause her anger?"

"La, Madame, you know better than ask the reason for her anger, her hatred. A *too* becoming robe, a really beautifying face-paste, an openly admiring admirer."

Pausing, she made an expression of contempt at the Queen's well-known dislike of any of these things when attached to a person other than herself.

"Any of these reasons is sufficient, and Madame can give her all, nay—more." The Baroness could not resist smiling at her faithful maid's endeavour to cheer her, but rejoined: "But these causes would scarcely provoke Her Majesty to such lengths as Rene but now indicated."

"True," muttered La Dariole beneath her breath, the tense expression returning to her face, as her anxiety lest Catherine really knew of the secret plans of her mistress conquered her, despite herself. She, who held almost every secret connected with her beloved mistress's disregard for some of the Queen's most earnest wishes, felt at this moment that she would go through fire and water to save the Baroness: and determined to be even more watchful for the future, to miss no hint of the way events were taking, so that she might guard her mistress and ward off danger.

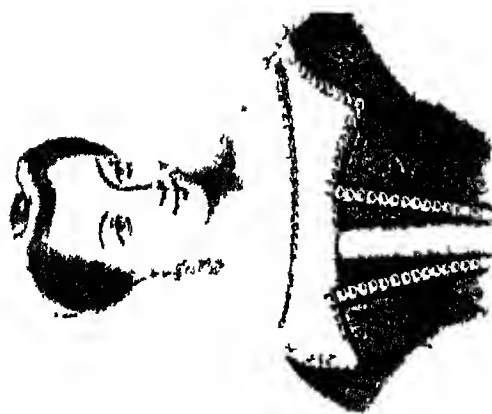
"I wonder," said the Baroness, "do I share the anger she feels towards the Abbé Gondi?"

"Upon what score, Madame. That you should have been the one to seduce him from his vows?"

She laughed lightly as she recalled the earnest young Abbé who had so long resisted the lure of the ladies of the Court and who had recently been tricked



CHARLOTTE, BARONESS DE BLAINE
STUBIANCA



DIANA DE POITIERS

into a position where his strength had failed him. "He was indeed a rarity in a Court of voluptuous abandonment, a morsel fit for the Queen herself."

The Baroness bit her lip, for she did not know whether mention of his name ashamed or amused her most.

"He was indeed of a simplicity and modesty quite miraculous," she rejoined. "But not for ever could he have encircled himself with the protection of an excessive austerity in our gallant Court."

"'Twas funny how we entrapped him, how unsuspectingly he hastened to give spiritual consolation to 'one of the ladies-in-waiting,' only to find himself locked in with the fair one——" said La Dariole, laughing merrily. "We knew that he would recover from his fright, however."

"'Tis true," smiled the Baroness, "but the sight of his cherubic countenance, when he found his retreat cut off by the double locking of the doors, proved almost too much for my composure."

La Dariole knew how the Baroness had allowed the young man time to recover, by speaking of religious matters;—how she had told him that in soliciting eternal life for others, he could not fail to obtain it for himself, pointing out that a prospective Bishopric or a Cardinal's hat was to be obtained as much by influence as by Christian virtues.

True, this applies to all avenues in this life, where personal worth counts as naught and where money is all powerful.

The Baroness had further stated that this was a means by which the episcopacy was often achieved by even those princes of the Church who held a high reputation for sanctity, thus so bewildering the entrapped young man as to utterly disarm him.

"How he blushed," laughed the Baroness, continuing in lighter strain, "How he stammered 'But Madame.' 'But Monsieur,' I rejoined, 'never let it be said that you were afraid of a pretty woman.'"

"La, la. We knew that when he recovered from his fright at sight of so much that was strange and seductive, he would quickly learn the humanities and rhetoric."

"Nay. It took time, La Dariole. I could scarcely contrive to make him raise his downcast eyes. In vain I brought to bear the artillery of a coquetry that has proved so seductive as never to have failed me before."

"Virtue of the Heathen Gods. How, then, did you achieve?"

"I decided to give him a shock, and if there was anything more likely to tame him to manhood than the sight I presented when I flung off my coverlet, I did not know of it. Nor do I now."

"I swear he saw only pure beauty in your female form divine."

"I vow he did. Poor little Abbé."

La Dariole laughed. "Now is it not possible that Madame the Queen has a jealousy that you should have inspired that first passionate emotion?"

"'Tis possible, but what I long to know is—does she suspect that I have influenced the Abbé in his opposition to her secret proposal?"

"Regarding the Catholics and the Huguenots?"

"Yes, and her plans to conciliate and unite them by the marriage of Marguerite to Henry of Navarre."

"But surely Her Majesty would not suspect that you even share the same views as the Abbé expressed?"

"She will not if I can avoid it and the Abbé would

have his tongue torn out sooner than betray me. He is no fool despite his youth and knows without any prompting from me that her desire cannot be free from speculative suspicion."

La Dariole nodded. "It bears the mark of a ruthless ambition."

"Indeed it does. I know she does not wish to wed her daughter to Henry for Marguerite's happiness, nor thus ardently desire to embrace our Huguenot friends at Court."

"She is aware that Marguerite loves already?"

"Yes, but since I, who alone know, feigned ignorance of his name, she perforce remains in ignorance."

"Can she suspect you of evading her because your sympathies lie with Marguerite and against her own plans?"

"It may be so, but while Marguerite is supposed to be ignorant of this plan to wed her out of hand, Her Majesty dare not risk a premature disclosure of her wishes by asking Marguerite how I have advised her."

"You have warned Marguerite?"

"Certainly, that she may gather strength against it. And I must also see Abbé Gondi and inform him that Marguerite approves his opposition to her marriage to a Huguenot."

"Had she not loved another she may have welcomed this proposal."

The Baroness shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"Maybe!" She looked round, "What a long time Rene is." She tapped her foot impatiently while La Dariole glanced through the tapestries.

"No sign of him. We shall be late in returning to the Louvre."

"You had better precede me, La Dariole, and make ready."

"Willingly, but will Madame be safe alone?"

The Baroness smiled amusedly.

"My good woman, you know well that were I molested, *some* cavalier would hasten to my rescue."

They both smiled at the recollection of an adventurous meeting that had been succeeded by an ardent love affair and La Dariole knew that the vivacious spirit of the Baroness was not adverse to a spice of danger.

Moreover, the streets were particularly safe at this time, since the last person caught waylaying a lady of quality had suffered the horrible penalty which decreed that he "have the soles of his feet blistered, his paps torn with red-hot pincers and boiling lead poured into the wounds, and his right hand torn off."

La Dariole hastened to return to the Louvre, where, that night, a gentleman of the Huguenot party was to dine privately with her mistress.

By the aid of La Dariole's lover, Francis, the sentry at the wicket of the Louvre, the Count de Clermont could secretly steal into the Louvre and spend happy hours with the lady of his heart, while La Dariole kept guard.

Meanwhile, her mistress rose and wandered about, awaiting Rene: and finally reseated herself at the table, fingering the bottle thereon abstractedly.

Her lovely head was framed against the background of dark tapestry, like a miniature, reflected in the light of the brazier, whose flame seemed to flicker and grow dim. The silence, sinister and brooding, held the forbidding room in a spell, the Baroness sat as though a figure in stone, motionless—contemplative. A furrow marked her brow and a

pulse beat in her white throat as if to signify her inward struggle.

Not even to La Dariole had she whispered the greatest reason for her desire to know how much was known to the Queen. She would have given anything to be certain that her greatest misdemeanour was known only to herself and to one other—her lover, the man whom Catherine desired with all the strength of her passionate nature. She, the Baroness-de-Sauve, her most intimate woman-in-waiting, was deliberately holding him from the Queen, while accepting the confidences that even the strongest woman will make to another of her sex in a weak moment.

Charlotte had, indeed, seen Catherine in such paroxysms of mental and physical anguish as to make her certain of a terrible retaliation should Catherine discover that she was the woman who stood between her and the Count de Clermont.

That there was a woman, Catherine knew, since she had failed in drawing from the Count the signs of interest and ardent liking which should properly have preceded the relationship which she longed for, while struggling to deny herself. He was younger and a Huguenot; and her efforts to conquer her desire were harder to put forth than if she were given the satisfaction of an ardent wooing, the results of which rested in her own hands.

Indeed, the knowledge that she was striving to deny herself something which another actually possessed made renunciation the harder to a woman who had suffered such repression as to make her volcanic.

Catherine, indeed, was pitiable. Every month a crisis occurred, when, her energy at full tide, she

knew the pangs of unreciprocated desire. All her life she had suffered thus and striven against submitting to a satisfaction begotten of other means. Among her women, several displayed the significant ankle bracelet, a fine golden mesh that gleamed under rare stockings of silk ; but, while Catherine excused Lesbianism in others on the score that one does not ask to be made or moulded in any set fashion, for herself she scorned it, as unnatural to her.

Indeed, she considered such a mode of expression and relief but a pandering to the lowest instincts and less to be excused than the natural means, even though it were not sanctioned by the Church—which can legalize the mild form of prostitution that exists in a marriage where love has died and condemn the rare and most holy love that can come as often to those who cannot wed as to those who can. Once she had secretly witnessed, through a slit in a curtain in a notorious Lesbian resort, an exhibition such as was common in Paris even in those days, and the sight—designed to rouse the emotions to the pitch of desiring to emulate it—turned her stomach over with disgust and shivering horror at the evils of life. Charlotte knew this and shuddered violently, in fear lest Catherine should ever suspect that she was taking the love of the Count.

“ It *must* be this affair of the Abbé’s,” she mused. “ No one knows of my visits to the Count, nor of his to me.”

Looking up as she heard a sound, she met the gaze of Rene as he returned, holding in his hand the box of paste. “ Pardon the delay, Madame. This wondrous concoction takes some time in the preparing. I advise Madame to regard it as precious and be careful to keep it locked away.”

In the act of bowing as he handed it over, he suddenly paused and listened intently for a moment. "And now I must prepare for an important visitor."

Rising, the box in one hand and the bottle from the table in the other, the Baroness inquired : " And what is this. Something for me or for a love-sick swain ? "

" Neither, Madame. That is a tonic I have prepared for the Abbé Gondi."

" Indeed. Was it ordered by himself ? "

" By himself."

" Then let me take it to him. I should welcome the necessity to approach him."

" Very well, 'twill save me a journey. But be certain to give it into his own hands."

" Trust me, Rene."

The Baroness put both bottle and box into a pocket, pulled up her hood and fastened her cloak. She was about to speak again when Rene placed his back to the parting in the tapestry through which the cupboard could be seen ; placed his fingers to his lips and motioned to her to leave. He bowed low as she turned and made her way out, then he hastened to the rear apartment as the cupboard swung slowly inward upon the secret door.

Standing in the space revealed, stood a tall cloaked figure, before whom Rene bowed, holding the door for the figure to step forth into the room.

Slowly, majestically, the figure of a woman approached the brazier. Rene closed the secret door and joined her—standing in a servile attitude, while she took off her cloak—which Rene put on a chair. A woman of magnificent, queenly stature, with comely features and hawk-like glance, stood revealed,

her black gown trimmed upon the wide sleeves with ermine, a rosary her only trinket.

The great and terrible Catherine-de-Medicis looked awe-inspiring in the light of the blue and flickering flame. Fairly tall and matronly, yet remarkably well preserved despite her fifty-two years, her whole bearing suggested repressed strength. Her head, with the sleek hair drawn back from each side of the face, was adorned by a winged cap of the kind affected by her tragic daughter-in-law, Mary Queen of Scots : under which her face showed ashen pale and austere.

Such was her hold over herself that her deep passions were cloaked by her white face ; only her burning eyes, pursed lips and heaving bosom, could betray her to the keen observer. With Rene she could relax as to a fellow-countryman and fellow-conspirator, and by her air Rene knew that she was alert even before she turned and fixed him with a keen glance.

" You have had a visitor ? " Her voice was harsh and strong and vibrated masculinely.

Rene knew the commanding tones well and, bowing low, he replied : " Yes, Your Majesty, one who wished to foresee the future."

" Indeed, and did I hear mentioned the Abbé Gondi ? "

" My visitor offered to convey to him a bottle of tonic I had prepared."

" Ha, tonic ! He is in need of one, I dare swear. And your visitor ? "

Rene had hoped to avoid the telling, while giving an appearance of confiding ; but there was no help for it. " The Baroness-de-Sauve."

Catherine considered this. Everything in her life

was considered with a view to possible use, and now she had learned something which she could use immediately and with tragic results. She smiled with secret satisfaction ere asking—"And have you ready our new horoscope?"

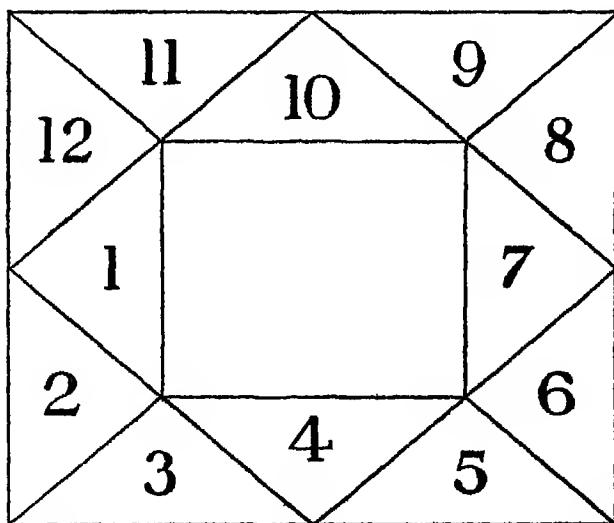
"It is ready."

"Then proceed."

Rene threw a packet into the brazier and the blue flame leaped up, bright and intense, showing up everything in the room in a clear light: he picked up the astrological chart and wand and commenced the reading of Catherine's future.

"How great a pleasure it is to predict to one who has implicit faith in the sublime art of astrology. Cæsar, Pompey and many other great men in days of old believed in it, as you do. I will consult the houses of the sun."

Clearing his wrists from the cumbersome hanging sleeves, he held up the chart and traced upon it with his wand.



Catherine keenly watched every moment.

"You know that we trace the heavens, connecting in these squares each planet of the constellation with which it was in conjunction at the hour of your birth?" said Rene. Catherine nodded impatiently, and he continued, pointing to each number in turn:

"Two—Wealth, three—Heritages, four—patrimonies, five—gifts, seven—marriage, nine—religion, ten—dignities. All these you have known: but I see more. One—new life, six—grief, eight—terror, twelve—imprisonment and violent death; a prediction similar in all respects to the one given by the black lamb and white kid upon which we last experimented."

He paused and laid down the wand and chart.

"Yes," said Catherine impatiently tapping her foot.

"Whereas the lamb and kid each gave three cries at the stroke of the knife, indicating the deaths of three important personages——"

"My three sons," cried Catherine, dramatically, as she took a few steps up and down the room, in agitated thought.

Only by her keen watchfulness had she averted calamity—ere this, and the knowledge her precious sons were still threatened was like a knife turning in her heart.

With an effort she composed herself; and pausing before Rene, she waited for him to continue. "The stars likewise form into three groups, while over them glows a radiance which dims their natural brilliance."

A tragic look crossed Catherine's face as she lifted it, as though in prayer, to Heaven. "And which is he, who—if he lives—will outshine all my sons? The accursed Henry of Navarre! But," turning to



CATHERINE DE MEDICIS AND RENE, COURT PURSUER
AND ASTROLOGIST

Rene, "thrice fortunate are these sons in that a devoted mother watches over them. They shall not be sacrificed without a blow in their defence, nor to a Heretic! Anything further?"

"Well, Madame, you remember that blood flowed copiously from the bodies of our sacrifices."

"Yes, indeed. My arms were bloody to the elbows, my shoes left bloody tracks about your cellar floor."

"Well, Madame, a peculiar reddish glow was apparent in the sky during my entire reading—which may be taken to indicate that either the deaths will occur with much bloodshed—or that, alternatively, by great bloodshed they may be averted."

"Ah!" A happy sigh burst from Catherine. She again paced the floor, while Rene watched—a sly smile upon his face, for he knew well what was passing through her mind.

"Caused or averted," she cried, stopping. "Then God does, indeed, support me. Heaven's seal of approval is upon my endeavour in this sign." She felt at this moment that her carefully laid plans for bloodshed at a time not far distant were really approved by Heaven, that in working under a guise of friendship to trap her avowed enemies she had God's sanction. "Listen," she commanded. "The blood you foresee *shall* be spilt—but not good Catholic blood. Blood of the Heretics, that disaster may not descend upon us. My sons, my religion shall *not* be sacrificed." She stood majestically for a moment, then a thought crossed her mind and she added: "Are my plans in danger of frustration from a woman?"

"Well, Madame, the sex of an enemy would not necessarily be indicated, so that it may be so."

"Very well! Have you ready the draught you were to prepare for the dog which has become troublesome?"

"It is ready, Madame." Rene turned to go and secure it. "Stay! Bring me also a bottle similar in all respects to that containing the tonic for the Abbé Gondi!" Rene bowed and continued on his way to do her bidding, while searching for the reason for her request. He soon found it.

"So: the Abbé is the Dog," he muttered to himself. "I must warn the Baroness!" Should he fail in this and should the Baroness believe that he had given her poison to convey to the Abbé—as she would do—she would withdraw her patronage; and Rene would lose contact with one who, innocently, provided him with knowledge of the trend of events at Court and he had no wish for such a thing to happen. Further, in the religious struggle rising to a head, he knew not if Catherine would win or lose. He knew that somehow Catherine would change the bottles: it would be easy for her to enter the room of the Baroness—since she had the key to every room in the Louvre: and he felt that Catherine would find a peculiar satisfaction in giving the Abbé his fatal punishing draught through the beloved hands of the Baroness, instead of through whatever other channel she had devised ere she ordered the poison for "a dog." Rene was not surprised that the Abbé was to be put away, despite the fact that he was a young man greatly liked by all: for he had had the temerity to oppose Catherine's suggestion of an alliance between Marguerite-de-Valois and Henry of Navarre. This was proposed by Catherine for the ostensible purpose of avoiding conflict in the realm between those of the two religions, by making

them equal : but Rene suspected a vastly different sequel.

Catherine could not tell her true reason—it was too atrocious to disclose prematurely : and the Abbé was entirely ignorant that when he opposed her in this, he was preventing her progress on to the great aim of her life—the extermination of the Heretics, particularly of the head and chief, Henry of Navarre, whom she regarded as a curse to her family and to France. It was he who kept together the dangerous adherents to Protestantism, he the centre round which all their ambitious schemes revolved.

Time and time again the Huguenots had conspired against the Throne and been defeated, temporarily subdued : and always they sprang to life again out of the ashes of burnt-out endeavour.

The Amboise Massacre—which Catherine had been responsible for during the reign of her son Francis II, and his Queen, Mary Stuart, had proved a serious setback to the insinuating fraction : yet, steadily through the years, the remnant of these Calvinists had gathered in strength upon strength and once again provided a serious menace to Catholicism. Would the Heretics never be stamped out ? Would she ever see the day when she was really free of them, thought Catherine, as she waited. She believed so and smiled to herself.

Rene himself did not guess just how far she had planned to go. Catherine and her fellow-conspirator, Henry de Guise, alone knew what goal she had in view. As she awaited Rene, she felt no compunction in what she was about to do. It was necessary to her plans that the Abbé died. If she could not rely upon him implicitly to do her will, he would not remain to be a stumbling block ; for Charles—the

weak, yet obstinate son of hers, was King—and might so easily take the Abbé's views for his own.

Further, she wished Marguerite to have no ally to support her in the refusal she expected, for Marguerite had a spice of Catherine's own firmness of will, as her mother well knew and would not be disposed of as though a pawn in a game. Indeed, Catherine was aware that a greater reason for a refusal to marry Henry of Navarre was ready to hand, since Marguerite was in love.

Watch as she might, Catherine could not place the man: direct inquiry produced no results—for Marguerite had not lived so long in Catherine's Court without learning the art of dissimulation: so her mother had good cause to fear lest Marguerite herself might frustrate her, in the end, by refusing to marry Henry of Navarre and appealing to the King against it. However, she intended that the marriage *should* take place. The Abbé would be removed along with anyone else who stood in her path. She reflected upon the vilely useful purposes to which she had put Madame Suave and her other pawns in the game.

Like those who keep bordel houses, she used them, body and soul: buying acquiescence with costly trifles, flatteringly buoying up despondence and disgust alike, but ever watchful that no personal whim superseded her commands. These were usually explicit according to the seriousness of her objective. At times she relaxed her vigilance and her gilded pupils were, to some extent, free to indulge their own idiosyncrasies. This was seldom: and was always taken full advantage of, often with dire consequences to the adventuresome or spirited, who conveniently disappeared forthwith.

She was annoyed with the Baroness on account of her affair with the Abbé, but in her case did not expect to find opposition even on the score of saving Marguerite from a loveless marriage. The Baroness would do her will, she reflected—she was but a tool to be used to complete her plans once Henry was in the net. Her beauty could be used to alienate Henry from Marguerite : his inflammable nature should not withstand the coquetry, practised and seductive, of the vivacious lady-in-waiting.

Catherine smiled grimly as she visualized Marguerite confronted with the evidence of unfaithfulness she meant to supply, once the marriage was a fact.

How her daughter's pride would flame at such a slight ! Marguerite was no daughter of hers, otherwise. Who was the man Marguerite loved, she pondered.

" Could I but discover him," she whispered to herself, while waiting. " Could I but search out him whose love token has fallen into my hands and I should know whom I have to thank for the opposition to the marriage that I fear." She tapped her foot angrily, then sat down and bowed her head in her hands. " Dear Heaven ! Help me to achieve this marriage, let my ambition be fulfilled, my hatred satiated, and my fear stilled. Let me succeed ! "

She was smiling when she raised her head and thus she sat, peering into the brazier as if to see in the flames the face which eluded her ; then, as Rene returned, she looked up, expectantly.

" This, Madame, is the bottle you desired : and this is the draught for the dog."

The two bottles, one tall and narrow, the other, containing the poison, squat and square, were handed over to Catherine who placed them in a receptacle

inside her cloak—which Rene then helped her to don.

“ You will soon know if the poison be effective,” she commented and moved toward the secret door.

“ May I have the honour to escort Your Majesty ?” asked Rene, as he followed and pressed the button which worked the spring.

“ Not to-night, I am awaited at the outer door.”

Catherine passed through the aperture. Rene bowed low, then closed the panel and advanced again into the room, in deep and troubled thought. He wondered if Henry of Navarre would take Marguerite to wife and meant to befriend him if he did, because the stars foretold for Henry a wonderful destiny, a brilliant future. That he, Rene, had caused the death of Henry’s mother, instead of a pleurisy, as had been stated, was an unfortunate fact ; but he had not known the gloves he poisoned were intended for Jeanne d’Albret. Catherine was too cunning to have told him that.

He gave a gesture of disgust, then set himself the task of writing a note to the Baroness, stating he had accidentally given her a bottle of poison. That, he reflected, would be sufficient : and he strode to the doorway and called “ Jean,” his voice echoing uncannily down the stairway.

From his den underneath the stairs the giant form of the old woman’s idiot son came shambling : his wild eye and tousled hair earning—with his appearance of great strength—his entry into whatsoever place he wished to go. Moreover, the insane, being held to be possessed, were allowed liberties denied to the sane : thus Jean’s figure was familiar all over Paris and few were the places—high and low—into which he had not penetrated. At a word from his

master, Rene, he would penetrate the most secret love-nest, dare the most dangerous feats and even at Court functions would take his place as unbidden guest, tricked out in jester's finery, at the bidding of his master and in search of either knowledge or some article he desired. Thus Rene had at hand a powerful, if harmless, ally : for once the idea of what he had to do percolated through to his brain, Jean pursued his aim oblivious to all else and never failed.

Through this means, Rene was the holder of such secrets as gave him an absolute whip-hand over many of the powerful citizens of Paris, and had it been wealth alone he sought, he could have levied such pressure as would have rendered him all-powerful.

His strange and secret mind was, however, concerned with greater things : the mysteries of life after death, the study of the supernatural, the exercise of sorcery and heathen mythology—these things were his love and his life. Many strange manifestations had occurred in his secret chambers and more than once the powerful presence of Jean had averted harm at the hands of a malignant power brought from Hades by his uncanny art. Jean departed on his errand, and Rene settled down to study, a smile on his face.

CHAPTER II

CATHERINE MOVES

THE Baroness arrived at the Louvre safely and hastened up the luxurious staircase, past marvels of the sculptor's art—displaying abandoned and voluptuous graces, past generations of Kings, who gazed, life-like, from their heavy, gilded frames and past innumerable mirrors, which reflected her glowing countenance in all the charming rosiness of hurry in the light of tapers in chandelier and candelabra.

Carving, intricate and ornamental, beautified all the woodwork, tapestries were spread lavishly and from the ceiling winged angels alternated with monstrosities—nymphs with satyrs : all smiling as if highly amused at the antics of the human beings who paraded down below.

She gave a sigh of relief as she came to her suite, and passed through the dimly lit apartments. Everything was in readiness for the arrival of her lover, Count de Clermont : and in happy anticipation she disrobed and took a bath. The scented water caressed her rounded limbs, she took pride in her long slim form and beautiful hair, which was confined under an elaborate and becoming boudoir cap. Under the water's soothing influence, she became calm and happy ; she splashed about like a child before rising and donning an ample dressing-robe and velvet slippers ; then she proceeded to her

bedroom, La Dariole following. Taking off the cap, her beautiful honey-coloured hair fell about her like a cloak. La Dariole assisted her out of her dressing-robe and revealed a form lovely as Venus new-risen, white limbs, shapely hips and firm bosom. A chemise with frilled bust-piece, was donned, then a robe of silver-tissue—open all down the front—which crossed over and tied with a girdle and was very *décolleté*. The bedroom was a fitting setting for so much beauty.

Opposite a centre double door draped with looped-up door-curtains, which opened into her private sitting-room, stood a bed with a high, carved back. Rose-pink satin curtains matched the coverlet and a small couch, covered with cushions in pink damask edged with pearls, stood at the foot. To the left of this stood a toilet table, draped with white muslin trimmed with Geneva lace, on which was a Venetian looking-glass framed in gold and an abundance of all the accessories of feminine beauty—the flasks, bottles and boxes containing pastes and essences: brush, comb, hand-mirror and ring-tray.

Before this stood a low upholstered chair and, near by, a pair of court shoes. Beautiful pictures, depicting the loves of Venus and Adonis, hung upon the walls and the Baroness had often compared herself with the classical Venus to the latter's disparagement.

She considered her own limbs more delicate and seductive than those of Venus and fully appraised her own worth.

She exchanged her slippers for the shoes and sat before the mirror, uncovering her white shoulders as her maid commenced to arrange her hair.

"Oh, Madame," said her maid, "I had it from Francis on my way in, that Maureval is talking."

" Oh, of what ? "

" Why, that matter in the corridor, when you slapped him across the face."

" Indeed ! I hoped he would take his rebuff like a gentleman."

" Nay, like the jackal he is, he vows vengeance."

" A poor satisfaction. He will never have more to boast of, I vow."

" He swears he shall. Francis said ' Beware him.' "

" Indeed. Why should I trouble. Love Maureval ? At least I love gentlemen."

" Just what I told Francis, but the man might be dangerous. He has hinted as much."

" The insolence of the man. Jesus Maria ! Was it not enough to pester me with his attentions without informing the whole world of the fact ? "

" Yes, indeed, Madame. The idea of Maureval aspiring to an intimacy with so much that is enchanting. I vow Madame's hair grows more luxuriant."

She lovingly caressed it ere proceeding to roll it into cunning little curls about the ears.

" A mere Captain," burst out the angry Baroness. " A nobody. To stop me in the corridor to tell me he always treated his women well because he had a good Mother. Mordi ! It's more than I treated him."

" La, La," laughed La Dariole. " What did he expect ? That you should fall into his arms ? Let him find his wenches in the gutter—where men drive the poor, loving, weak creatures that some man betrays. How dare he aspire to you."

" He actually did not consider himself to be aspiring. He thinks I should accept his attentions,

as from a good and noble person—which he deems himself—to a woman who has been possessed by many.”

“Surely not, Madame.”

“Indeed, yes. He considers me as he would a coquette of the streets and to be perfectly blunt, he has the wit to see that what we call conquest is only another form of prostitution. He forgets there are different grades and that where a personage may amuse himself with a woman of the lowest class, no man of less means and standing can desire a woman of the highest class—God save the mark—without being said to aspire.”

“There are women to whom any man aspires in desiring, also the reverse. Every woman, good and bad, puts a certain price upon herself, her assets, of course,” said La Dariole, coolly.

“Which is exactly what determines her standing,” said the Baroness, “although I see no reason why a man and a woman should not comfort each other irrespective of standing, wealth or the distinctions which regard either of them as bad or good.”

“Men do not appreciate good women, so why be good,” asked La Dariole, who felt they were on delicate ground.

“Why, indeed. She is a certain type of man’s especial prey. That is the man who deems himself too good to waste upon a loose or professional woman. Nothing less than a foolish virgin or good young matron for him! Think of the lives ruined by this type: poor inexperienced innocents, the mad-houses are full of them, their brains destroyed by the cruel shock of disillusionment, the realization that the man to whom she has given herself in an ecstasy of emotion—in which the physical is but a very

small, if beautifully conclusive part—has been impelled to take of her body, her virtue and her honour by nothing more lasting than the momentary need for his own physical relief and enjoyment : for the satisfaction of which there are already only too many women who either deserve, or who look for,—God help them—nothing better.”

“ Fortunately, Madame, good women rarely realize how they are duped.”

“ ’Tis as well.”

“ Every good woman believes the man to whom she falls to be good, also ; and however much she suffers in her fall and because of it, she actually believes he suffers too and blames herself as the cause of it.”

“ While the man knows he is safe from retaliation, however badly he may behave, because,” here the lips of the Baroness curled in scorn, “ she is too good to expose him. Consider the pure women betrayed under a promise, carried away in the expectation of marriage or help in some great aim of life, without expectation of which there would have been less interest.”

“ Then, of course, a man does as expected, since he could not have gained her love otherwise than in the expectation of marriage on the one hand ; nor, on the other, have earned the gratitude that led to love. Nor has he any right or excuse for taking her if he intends to fail her.”

“ But how many men yield to pitiful entreaty when the question arises ? ” The Baroness snapped her fingers.

“ A woman should make it plain what she expects.”

“ Yes, but that would smack of bargaining.”

"Better that then trust to a man's honour and be wronged."

"Ah," sighed the Baroness, "life is a puzzle; men are darlings and yet beasts, and they hate a rebuff, particularly from any one they imagine they honour by desiring. They believe we should fit in with their whims, particularly when they are amorous."

"A woman certainly needs to keep her head."

"And her heart," laughed the Baroness. "A woman is disarmed before a man she loves. A woman of the world never loves, but provokes a desire which she rewards—provided the lover be generous."

"'Tis fitting."

"Alas," sighed the Baroness, "we are what men make us. How rarely does a woman receive from a man anything for nothing, and why should she? Men hold the whip hand."

"For centuries women have been subservient to men and forced into exploiting sex to provoke generosity, when needing or desiring anything," said La Dariole.

"How to live is a choice of evils for many of us and experience ever sins against experience," said the Baroness, lightly.

"How sad and cruel it is, Madame, that women have to be clever in so low an art for a means, in some cases, of keeping body and soul together," said La Dariole, sighing heavily, for she knew life at its worst.

"Not necessarily," said her mistress, "it depends upon the woman."

"A woman cannot give for a promised boon until she receives it, lest a man take, and pass on, withholding what he promised."

"He gives willingly enough," said the Baroness, "if she be clever and succeed in making him wait."

"Play with him, you mean?"

The Baroness nodded, then as she thought of Clermont and her own sincerity of feeling towards him, she continued:

"Which is precisely what a truly good and loving woman cannot, will not, do; and often she pays a terrible price in suffering for her uprightness. But the woman pays *always* in this life, be she decked with the finest jewels of a crown." Sweeping her arm out, to indicate the room, she continued: "And this life of amorous intrigue and so-called ease is mostly the hardest, despite the comfort of luxurious surroundings; merely a pampered idleness, devoid of self-respect. We have not even the respect of those who make us what we are, but are merely the instruments of their pleasure—to be discarded for a bright new toy. Moreover, women who live by their wits waste the God-given years, instead of progressing, physically and mentally, through daily upward struggle—as we were all meant to do."

She sighed heavily, bitter thoughts crossing her mind.

"Now do not let us get morbid, for God's sake, Madame. You had to make your decision years ago and decided to fall in with Her Majesty's tempting offer of a gay life at Court."

"Yes, and sometimes I wish I had chosen the other path, which looked as hard as this looked rosy. The only thing worse than the army of self-murdered betrayed, of which I sometimes dream—fair young things wringing ghostly hands and weeping brokenly—is the army of women who have lived by their bodies, all but their wits in a state of stagnation:

and of such am I—thanks to opportunity and my own vile worldliness.” She paused for a moment.

“Dariole”—turning tragically, her face twisted with pain, “sometimes I would give anything and everything to go back, to relive the years, to regain my ideals; to bear sweet children of my purity, strength, and God-given beauty.”

She bowed her head, tears flowing; and La Dariole herself wiped away a tear as she placed her arms tenderly around the bowed form of the Baroness.

“I know, Madame, I know. But we cannot go back, so why regret. It is so vain and so misleading, too. The things we might have done appear, on looking back, to be painted with such rosy hues: but, alas, so often we see a mirage. You are the ‘lover’ woman, not the domestic or mother type—so cease repining. Remember,” soothingly, “love is near.”

Wiping away her tears, Charlotte gave a toss of her head, as though to indicate the casting-off of sad reflection.

“Ah yes,” she sighed. “Love! A sweet, beautiful emotion in its highest form, it is still attractive and enslaving, even when reduced to the level of deliberation through intrigue, prostitution, or mere wantonness.” Turning her eyes heavenward, a spiritual and beautiful smile illuminated her face and she whispered:

“The sacred, most holy, spiritual flame, uplifting and radiant and flooding the soul with rapture, the love that joins two hearts while their persons are far apart, and through laughter and tears, is not for all of us; and comes, alas, oft too late.”

“Too late, in many ways, for you, Madame. You are married and you are—Catherine’s!”

“Oh, don’t remind me,” burst out the Baroness.

"And let me tell you that had not my marriage turned out so unsuitable and unsatisfactory, I should not have been driven—yes driven—into my present position. I might have been all the things I could have wished—had I met and married the right man."

"I know, forgive me."

"That's all right, La Dariole. You are like an instrument upon which no hand has played. You have not my nature, you have not vibrated to such a situation as a madly adoring elderly husband, whose presence has become obnoxious to you ; whose horrible, insane jealousy—the jealousy that confines you to four walls with a chain round your neck—holds you from the world, from life and laughter : and does not give, nay, simply *cannot* give—anything to satisfy a craving soul in return." She started to her feet, and wildly paced the room, then stopped and confronted her maid.

"Can you wonder I accepted Catherine's offer to live at Court, even though I knew I faced a soul degradation in certain of my duties ? I had to get away, I should have gone mad otherwise : and even while I regret my lost purity and ideals I know I did the better thing."

"Your spirit is fine, Madame," murmured La Dariole as the distressed woman reseated herself.

The Baroness turned affectionately and patted the hand of the honest creature.

"To do no worse than we must, to fight all the way, and in failing, to give happiness to others—surely God will not judge me hardly ?"

"I am not sure. We do the best we can with the impulses, desires and weaknesses of the conglomeration of emotions that is us : the forming of which began with past generations."

"No two of us can be utterly alike, can *possibly* so fit in as to be as one: and this makes tolerance the greatest virtue and the greatest necessity—particularly in married life."

"You are certainly very tolerant regarding the Baron de Suave, Madame."

"While he simply walked ruthlessly, if blindly, over my poor heart and so lacerated it that the years remaining to me cannot give sufficient of kindness, of love, of understanding and tolerance to make me forget."

"But forget it for the time, Madame. There," as she puts finishing touches to the silky hair, "what a picture you make."

The Baroness viewed herself with evident satisfaction; stretched her arms languidly, then commenced to make up her face.

Cream, powder, rouge and more powder were applied; then eye-shadows, which seemed to make them larger. Lip-paste made ruby her shapely lips, then she placed upon her fingers several fine rings from her tray.

A final glance assured her that she was looking her best; she ran a finger under each eye and saw with satisfaction that she looked years younger than her age, nor yet showed signs of the life of amorous intrigue she was leading. La Dariole took out the dressing-robe and toilet square and returned with a squat bottle in her hand.

"Where shall I put this, Madame?"

"Oh, the Abbé's tonic. On the toilet-table—here." She indicated a place—where La Dariole set it, then rising she passed through the double doors into her private sitting-room. La Dariole turned back the coverlet on the bed, blew out the tapers and lit a

small silver lamp, which she placed upon the toilet-table and then again went out.

The Baroness inspected the small, quaintly carved table set for two and saw with satisfaction the elegant silver dishes, containing fruit and cakes, gleaming in the light of the six-armed candelabra with its tall candles. The door at the rear of the room was beautifully carved and led into the same room as did the other door in the bedroom—a large reception room, leading direct on to the corridor. The outer door was hung with heavy velvet and, when the Baroness was entertaining, La Dariole sat before this door, listening for any movement in the corridor outside.

Many times she had known that someone or something was prowling about the Louvre at dead of night, but as long as no one directly approached the suite of the Baroness, La Dariole turned a deaf ear to the scuffling, cries or even clashes of arms that she had heard. The most usual sound at night was the tinkling of keys as Catherine passed by, but just now La Dariole was listening for the double knock of the Count de Clermont, secretly passed in by the sentry ; and hoping he would not be long.

Charlotte hummed happily at she lay down upon a luxuriously upholstered couch and glanced around the room : at its hangings of blue velvet, at the embossed screen to the left of the carved door, at its deep pile carpet and quaint, upholstered chairs, which matched the couch on which she lay. A soft languor seized upon her limbs, she sighed and stretched full length, one white bare arm behind her head. Her eyes closed, nor opened as the carved door softly fell ajar, to disclose the head of a handsome man. He saw the recumbent form and turned

to La Dariole, finger to lips, ere stepping into the room.

Tall and fair, his graceful figure attired somewhat cavalierly, the Count de Clermont looked less than his thirty-five years, nor at first glance could be taken for the experienced diplomat and man of the world that he was. His bland, innocent expression hid a calculating mind and amorous disposition; every woman in his life believed herself to be the only one and herself to have seduced him—no small feat where the woman was experienced.

This friend and adviser to Henry of Navarre was—while resident in Paris—not unwilling to do as Paris did; consequently he was one of the happy and apparently irresponsible members of the gay set which formed the Court circle, while being there for a definite diplomatic purpose. He had quickly formed an attachment with the vivacious Baroness and, being in no wise ignorant of the charm of his appearance and personality, had known no surprise at her ready preference. Consequently, he had no suspicion that she was so convenient a companion because of strict orders from Catherine to draw him out. Charlotte knew well that her instructions, in this case, did not include private entertaining—that was to be Catherine's own pleasure: and the fact that she was deliberately going further than her instructions and retarding Catherine's progress made the Count's private visits to her suite fraught with danger.

Only the Baroness knew that her full reason for being so secretive and fearful of discovery lay in this, and was not in any way connected with her fear of her husband: which was understood by both the Count and La Dariole to be the motive for

her great secrecy and watchful fear. However, Count de Clermont was happy enough not to bother about reasons, but just to go on enjoying fate's gifts, philosophically. As he paused by the couch and looked down upon the alluring and beautiful picture made by the Baroness, he felt the pride of possession of the lovely creature and dropping upon one knee, put both arms about her.

"Charlotte." Her eyes opened as he bent and kissed her, then her arms enfolded his neck and held him close.

"At last," she whispered, and endeavoured to sit up: but he renewed his kissing until she laughingly made him desist.

"You appear very urgent and greatly in haste, Clermont."

"What did you expect? Never had a princess or queen a slave so fondly devoted and faithful."

"Anyone surprising us would suppose it."

Both laughed as she again eluded his kisses, until at length he muttered, "Ventre Saint Gris! How you keep me waiting!"

"'Tis sweet to pause and look upon the features we love," murmured the Baroness, apparently relenting, "and to hear the voice that thrills the heart: and I would take my fill of these—for the night is before us."

"But you don't understand how it is with a man. I want to hold you close."

"Nay, can you doubt my understanding, after the proofs I have given you of it. Why, scarcely have I known you but my enchanted heart is wholly yours."

"Your amiability, Charlotte, has a potent influence over me. So seductive when you wish to please and more so when you love. I shall be patient!"

" 'Tis so little to ask. Alas—what a fate is that of women. Men desire us for a few moments, possess us for a few seconds—and perhaps render us unhappy for the rest of our lives."

"Come, Charlotte, a woman has the outcome in her own hands."

"But consider, Clermont. If we refuse, we at once become prudes, unworthy alike the fortune and pleasure with which we are wooed: if we yield to pleasure alone, we are 'loose' and if to fortune—we at once take our place in your estimation among those women whose favours you purchase and whom you cannot venture to introduce among those whom you respect."

Clermont considered a moment, seriously; then he laughed. "My beautiful one, you are most adroit. You redouble my desires while imposing upon my experience. But look, give me your hand."

He took her hand and placed thereon a fine ring, which he drew from his doublet and watched the pleasure light up her face. Then, as she threw both her arms around his neck and kissed him, he clasped her warm body, bending her back to look deep into her beguiling eyes. He could not tell just what manner of woman this was, did not know how to take her sudden joys, sudden passions and as sudden tears, the tears that never lay far beneath the surface—but welled up from a touch upon her sensitive heart.

Gratitude for a kindness, a thought, can be mistaken in its expression for a payment for value received: and because he was heart-whole and well armoured against Cupid's darts he did not visualize her love-starved heart, nor the pain which casual acceptance of things according to his own reasoning

could give. As he stooped to kiss her again, a knock at the door started them apart. Clermont got up and opened the door, to admit La Dariole, bearing a flagon of wine.

"La ! Madame," she cried, as she set it down. "You must be faint, you look so pale."

The Baroness *felt* faint, as, just for a moment, she had had the feeling that Catherine was behind the door, quite forgetful that Catherine never knocked to give warning of her approach.

"You startled me. Be very certain to keep close watch and apprise me of anything unusual—as you value my life."

"Never fear, Madame," replied La Dariole : and she retired, to resume her seat at the outer door. The Baroness now rose and took her seat at the table. Clermont sat opposite and they made a simple meal.

"Has Her Majesty approached you regarding a matter of vital importance to Henry of Navarre ? "

"I cannot say that she has, Charlotte ! Tell me, is she amorously inclined. I could swear her cold austerity cloaks hidden fires."

"Hush ! Do not let us discuss such matters. I know that she suffers in that her best years have gone unappreciated and that, being a queen, few dare aspire to comfort her. Has she mentioned a marriage ? "

"A marriage with whom ? " Clermont, fully aware of the project, smiled amusedly at the seriousness of the face opposite him.

"Marguerite-de-Valois."

"*Pardieu !* So that is why she has lost no opportunity of extolling the charms of her fair daughter—not but to take herself a complacent credit for being her mother ! "

"Do not favour it, Clermont. The affections of Marguerite are not for Henry of Navarre."

"That need be no obstacle. Love and marriage so seldom go together."

"Please, for my sake. Marguerite should not be the means by which the reformed religion is married to the Pope."

Count de Clermont was busy turning the matter over and his keen mind reviewed every possible motive for Charlotte's warning. He made up his mind to appear to accede to Charlotte's request, while actually he favoured the situation.

He felt a warming of his interest in Catherine, who must appreciate his master to propose making him her son-in-law. In the meantime, he assured Charlotte that he should leave the position where it was.

So she felt more happy as she rose and felt his arm about her, leading her to the couch.

"How I love you," he whispered, holding her at arm's length, his fingers tingling at the touch of her rosy flesh.

"Hold me close, Clermont. I have had an unnerving day. Rene gave me a most gloomy forecast and invoked the spirit of one dear to me. Somehow I thought it was the spirit of you."

"Why, what foolishness—when you see me in the flesh. If so concerned for the spirit, be kind to me, now."

She looked into his eyes. A wave of tenderness towards this man swept through her; she felt she wanted to be good to him, to be kind, even to her own hurt. Putting both arms round his neck, she kissed him, a slow kiss that lingered and clung—and as passion met passion his arms closed around her,

fiercely. Then, her head upon his shoulder, his arms about her, they passed into the bedroom and stood face to face a moment ere he dropped to his knees and passionately kissed her hands. She ruffled his hair ; he laughed like a boy and rising again took her in his arms.

They were standing thus, when the carved door was opened quickly. La Dariole passed in, closed the door and darted to the bedroom.

"The Queen, the Queen," she whispered—then rushing to the table she nipped out the lights, picked up the plates, glass and cutlery used by the Count and put them quickly behind the screen : then herself hid there, as the Baroness pointed.

"Quick, behind the window curtain."

The Count darted to cover as the Baroness flung off her wrapper and shoes and slipped into bed.

Her heart beat so loudly as to shut out all other sounds from her ears and she turned on her side, away from the light, so that her face should be in the shadow : and awaited—she knew not what. Everything seemed so still ; she did not dare to open her eyes fully, but through their long lashes she saw a shadow cross the wall and guessed that Catherine was within the room. Rightly, for scarcely had she got into bed before the carved door had opened, noiselessly, and Catherine entered—the light from the small lamp she carried throwing grotesque shadows. A ghostly figure she looked, sinister and full of threat, as she paused at the dining-table before gliding across into the bedroom, where the small flame upon the toilet table showed her the bottle she had come to seek.

Approaching the bed, she paused to listen for the regular breathing that the unhappy Baroness

managed to emit, despite her fear : and, apparently satisfied, Catherine turned to the toilet-table, picked up the bottle and replaced it with another. A grim smile twisted her mouth as she scornfully noted the numerous beauty aids used by the Baroness, then she turned and left the room as quietly as she had come.

Through the sitting-room, carefully closing the door after her, through the reception-room into the corridor—she passed ; and after locking the door behind her she made her way to her own apartments, in a jubilant frame of mind.

Now the Abbé was doomed and no one would in any way connect his death with her, the Queen ; indeed, she would assume great surprise and some grief over the unhappy end of the poor young man, who had died . . . a martyr to his zeal.

Meanwhile, after a long silence during which Charlotte felt she must scream, La Dariole cautiously made her way to the outer door, found it locked and rightly presumed that Catherine had gone, intending to return no more for the present. Hastening into the bedroom, she found the Baroness half-sitting up and looking so wan as to cause her faithful maid to support her.

“Come forth, Clermont,” gasped the Baroness, and as he came and stood before her, she gripped his arm. “Oh, my poor heart, I vow it almost ceased to beat as she bent over me ! My blood froze.”

“And mine, Charlotte. She was so terribly quiet :—the light appeared to advance on air, with no sound save a tinkling.”

“Her keys,” she whispered.

“I pity the poor soul who meets that spectre in the long gallery,” he rejoined. “But come. It is over. Let us recapture rosy dreams.”

He sat upon the bed beside Charlotte and motioned La Dariole to depart ; which she did—returning to listen at the outer door.

Taking Charlotte in his arms, he was surprised and somewhat touched to find her limp and unresponsive. She must have been more affected than he knew, he reflected : and wondered why. He himself had felt more excited than anything else and had watched Catherine and seen her pause beside the toilet table. Her back being toward him, he had not seen the movements of her hand : and now it occurred to him to enquire what possible motive she could have had for her call.

“ Why did she come here ? ”

The question seemed to rouse the Baroness. She sat up, replaced her wrapper and shoes and looked round, as though seeking something to indicate the reason.

“ She certainly seemed to pause by the toilet table,” said Clermont.

The Baroness crossed to it and studied it, intently.

“ Nothing missing here. What can it have been ? ” She again looked round and would willingly have missed her most valued possession to have had the assurance that Catherine had come for that instead of what she feared, . . . to see if Clermont was there.

Had she but known it, Catherine as yet had no cause to suspect such a thing : but she was to learn much before another twenty-four hours passed away and doubt what she heard because of that night when she had found the Baroness apparently asleep and alone.

The Count saw plainly that the Baroness was so

deeply troubled as to have almost forgotten his presence and for a moment chagrin warred with tender pity, then he put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her hair.

"Adieu! I am a brute to expose you to so frightful! a strain. I shall take my leave at once and wait until you visit me, two nights hence."

"How strong you are," said the Baroness, gratefully.

She threw her arms about him, kissed him once, then let him go. "La Dariole will see you safely out." The good woman put on her cloak, while Clermont adjusted his cape and took up his plumed cap; then, as cautiously as possible, they made their way to the courtyard, where Francis opened the wicket. Hidden in the shadows Jean was an interested onlooker at the Count's departure.

La Dariole watched for a moment the erect form striding away: then, as it vanished in the darkness, she turned with a sigh. A few whispers to Francis, a kiss or two and she re-entered the Louvre and returned to the apartments of the Baroness, with a note in her hand.

Francis had given her this and a message for the Baroness; but for which a man had died.

She found her mistress in deep thought, pacing the room.

"A note from Rene, Madame."

When she broke open the letter and read its contents, the Baroness stood still. "So! The bottle," she exclaimed in a sibilant whisper.

"What is it, Madame? Francis said it was important."

"Read it." Charlotte handed over the note.

La Dariole, doubtfully: "You mean . . . ?"

She paused as she thought it out, then she understood that somehow Rene had become aware of the Queen's intention and had chosen this way of preventing it. What a dastardly thing—she reflected—to make another responsible in fact for giving a man his death draught. The situation was hardly improved by their discovery, though—because, if the Abbé did not die, Catherine would believe that somehow she had been circumvented and find another way of achieving her aim. The first thing was to make sure that the bottle contained poison. So Charlotte instructed La Dariole to try it upon her toy dog, which lay asleep in its basket in the ante-room.

La Dariole poured a little of the poison into its drinking water, then roused the little creature and placed it before the water.

The Baroness felt regret stir in her breast as she watched it drink, after yawning and stretching; since it was a gift from the Abbé himself. Strange if it should give it's life to save his, she thought.

The dog shrank, then lifted his head wonderingly as though aware of some strange inner disturbance: then, 'ere it could turn its piteous eyes to it's mistress, it was seized with convulsions and quickly expired.

Tears made her eyes misty as the Baroness picked up the little body and replaced it in its basket, then she paced the floor, deep in thought, La Dariole sadly watching her.

The Baroness was trying to find some solution and at last she made up her mind to see the Abbé and propose to him a plan whereby Catherine should believe she had succeeded. That would avoid suspicion falling upon Rene and herself, she reflected—and the outcome would rest with the Abbé himself.



CHARLOTTE DE SALVE AND THE ABBÉ
CONDI



MARGUERITE DE VALOIS AND HER LOVER

So, wearily, she returned to bed—the bed which had promised so much, but which gave her only troubled dreams until daybreak.

Meanwhile, the Count proceeded on his way, ignorant of the bulky figure of Jean behind him—walking as silently as a cat, for he was cunning. Instead of returning to his hotel, Clermont passed through the sleeping city until he arrived at the great deserted entrance of the ancient Catacombs. Close behind him and between him and the watchful Jean crept, silent-footed, four Apaches, who—having trailed Clermont to this deserted spot—now prepared to strike. For a few moments they paused to discuss in whispers the man's strange destination, then with drawn stilettos rushed forward. Clermont, his ears sharpened by caution, turned and drew his rapier, simultaneously: but 'ere the first attacker reached him a huge hand descended upon the scruff of his neck and made of his body a whirling flail to sweep his three companions from their feet. Before the astonished eyes of the Count, the body was flung to join the three others upon the ground, from whence they picked themselves up, and fled wildly, leaving a gleaming weapon as the only sign of their presence. Jean bent and picked it up and presented it to the Count; who now, as he placed it in his belt, examined his rescuer, who stood with fumbling hands and an expression of somewhat astonished pleasure at his own success.

"Who are you?" The Count spoke sharply. Jean cocked his shaggy head to one side.

"Jean, the idiot, they call me," he said slyly.

"Ah, Rene's henchman," murmured the Count and rapidly considered how he might use him.

Could he learn anything of the grim Catherine's

plans that might be known to Jean through Rene—Catherine's poisoner : or should he merely use him as a personal bodyguard by the ties of gold ? Why not combine the two ! Taking a purse of gold mesh from his pocket he counted out a substantial reward and dropped the money, coin by coin, into Jean's ready palm. Then, taking him by the arm, he led him into the dark and sinister passage leading down through the bowels of the earth to the resting-place of thousands of dead, the meeting-place of conspirators very much alive and the refuge of the hunted and the starving.

Intersecting passages ran left and right from the main corridor, themselves intersected and leading into such a maze as many a man had been lost in—to die of starvation and insanity. Indeed, the great underground city was honeycombed with them, many having row upon row, tier upon tier, of dead rotting in their holes on either side. The stench was, in some of the more recently used burial-places, abominable ; in others, the long-dead corpses had fallen into dust and only an earthy smell contaminated the gloom.

Clermont took out a tinder box that he carried in his pocket, struck the flint and lit a taper. In its wavering light they proceeded slowly and came to the first turning. Here, in a cavity sat three men in the light of a small lamp.

Silently each group scanned the faces of the others, then Clermont spoke. " Navarre," he said, and the three arose and silently saluted ; turned, and made their way down the echoing passage—turning first left, then right, until all sense of direction was lost.

Suddenly voices could be heard and Jean's eyes

sparkled under their shaggy brows. Turning abruptly to the left, the passage opened out into a large cave where, in the light of tapers stuck in the necks of bottles and placed in niches cut in the rock walls, an assorted company of men forgathered. Excitement was running high. One huge man was expounding a fiery policy and a heated argument was in progress. "Down with Catherine!" cried a maimed man, shaking high his handless right arm. "Aye, down with her!" chorused others, while in the background an emaciated and scarecrow bunch of beggars in a filthy and diseased condition chuckled and nudged each other at the amusement the scene afforded them.

Clermont looked sharply around, then turned to Jean. "Keep close to me," he said: then strode into the midst of the crowd.

"Ho, the Count!" was the cry that went up from the one side. "He. He. It's Jean, the idiot," from the other, as conspirators and beggars in turn recognized the new-comers. The Count pushed his way up to the bulky speaker.

"Well, Pierre, how goes the meeting?"

"Ah, Monsieur, you arrive unexpectedly. *Mon Dieu*, they are a poor lot. Scarce can they be roused to see the danger so plain to our eyes, but would go placidly on till put an end to by the machinations of that she-devil, Catherine."

Clermont stood upon the wooden stool and held up his hands for silence, but a voice called, "Whose your pretty friend?"

A gurgle of laughter greeted this sally, and when it died away after many obscene chuckles, he replied, "You all have heard of Rene's idiot: well"—as heads shook vigorously—"this is he."

"What's he doing here?" cried a voice.

"Why, you fool, the fellow might be useful, since he has shown himself so partial to me as to save my life this night."

"What?" The chorus again rose high in speculation and the beggars pricked up their ears: while Jean stood stupidly looking around. Among the crowd were many cloaked figures who held high place in France and who plotted to gain control of the country through the policy of Protestantism, as opposed to Catholicism. They laboured to rouse the uneducated Huguenots to assert themselves, even as the Catholic leaders worked upon their poorer brothers: and both sides used Religion as their watchword, while themselves caring not in the least for the tenets of any religion, but willing to employ any means so long as they could achieve their aim—power.

Pierre approached Jean and closely examined him, then curled the muscles of his great arms to indicate his own strength. Jean, not slow to grasp his meaning of superiority, rolled back his own sleeves and showed to the gaping crowd a ripple of steel under the skin, while he smiled sheepishly.

Pierre scowled: then Clermont spoke: "I am here to tell you that my master is pleased with the progress made but urges you all to spare no pains to arouse our brethren to a proper sense of their duties. Be assertive! Create interest in our sufferings at Catherine's hands by publicly and cleverly drawing attention to the administration which allows Huguenots to be needlessly murdered and gives preference to their Catholic brothers in all things."

"Hear, hear"; "Bravo" and sundry cries rang out, then a voice spoke, quietly: "Are we to hold

out the assassination of the Royal family and usurpation of the Throne as our ultimate intention ? ”

Clermont paused and looked keenly round, for he did not care to consider results should a spy be present and hear what was at least rankly traitorous to the Throne. At last he spoke. “ Let each man present prove himself.” He signed to his three companions and they lined all present, excepting the beggars at the far end of the cave, along one wall. Pierre stood by Clermont, while Jean wandered vacantly about : then each man passed the three and approached singly and made his sign out of sight of the others. This was made with the right thumb, in the act of ripping open the breast : and when every man had proved himself they gathered close around and Clermont spoke : “ ’Tis true there are plans afoot to force the hands of Catherine, but we must proceed without definite assurance as to this. We desire the success of Luther’s religion above all things—yes ? ”

“ Aye ” came the reply from every throat.

“ Then we employ any means to our end—the extermination of the Valois, beginning with the Queen Mother, the source of all cunning.”

“ Down with Catherine ! ” a voice murmured, and all nodded.

Two of the beggars, who seemed to be aloof from the rest, exchanged significant glances at this. While as poorly dressed as the others, they were not deformed—which was remarkable in a community which made its living by the horrid extent of personal deformity and disease. Among the scare-crow bunch every deformity was to be seen : the hunchback, the crippled in leg and arm, twisted neck, and blindness—or its assumed counterpart,

for many had the trick of so turning up the eyes that the whites alone showed. Added to this, every conceivable means was used to heighten effect : wheeled trolleys on which one contorted his distorted body, patches with which another hid the supposedly empty socket, and again the designedly torn and stained clothing—which scarce seemed to hang together, but which proved a real winner in stirring the breasts of the kindly in aid of so woebegone and tattered a specimen of humanity.

Most of them, in achieving the distressing spectacle, acutely harmed themselves : they were, indeed, pitiful specimens in the main, but one or two there were who lived like lords on the proceeds of begging and proved not unkind to their less fortunate neighbours. Sometimes begging was exchanged for thieving, and many a good housewife's purse has been emptied jubilantly and shared ; or again, its contents laid out to purchase what was to most a royal banquet.

Thus the city of the dead had occasionally been the witness of uproarious scenes, wherein great stores of eatables and many bottles of wine were consumed amid coarse laughter and prayerful thanks alike : and many a distant tune heard in the small hours was the sound of music played at the scene of revelry.

These two then, standing apart, were conspicuous, and Jean in his wanderings went close enough to note the nod that they exchanged. As he lurched away, the one crept behind Clermont, his hand produced a needle-pointed dagger from his loose blouse and 'ere a second passed it was poised.

The fatal blow was never struck : the fist of Jean flashed straight to the jaw and down went the would-be assassin like a felled ox. The whispered

conference ceased as Clermont glanced sharply round. Jean was laughing idiotically, the other conspirator had lain down and appeared asleep and the beggars were scrambling to their feet and pushing forward.

"Anyone know this man?" Clermont demanded, and several in turn viewed the face of the prostrate man. All shook their heads but one. "Yes, I know him. The son of Cruce, the watchmaker, and a fiery Catholic."

"Ventre Saint Gris, how comes he here?"

Pierre went among the beggars, desiring knowledge of him, and learned he had been working with the beggars' company for a period of three weeks. None knew more.

"That's his chum there," cried a piping voice, like a child's, but, behold, when the speaker appeared, it was a wizened old man with a bulbous nose that seemed to dwarf his puny body: and many a coarse laugh rang out.

"Where?" demanded Clermont, but the space was miraculously empty that a moment before had been occupied and out of the passage the back of the fleeing man receded.

"After him," cried the Count, furious at being tricked, and scarce had he spoken than the idiot Jean went after him with flying leaps. Pierre spoke, "That idiot appears to have taken a fancy for the role of personal attendant to you," he remarked to Clermont.

"*Mon Dieu!* 'tis an unwholesome thought, but he may be useful if I can make him talk," the Count replied.

"How?"

"Oh, a woman, perhaps: or a taste of the branding-iron. *Pardieu!* he returns, alone."

Jean reappeared, shaking his tousled head, but, strange to say, he did not inform any that he had caught up with his man at the bend of the next passage and exchanged friendly, pregnant words with him. Pierre patted the Count. "The passages are hell to the uninitiated: no wonder he missed him," he said, and clapped Jean heartily on the back.

Meanwhile, two of the company had removed the unconscious man up to the far wall, the beggars settled down again and on a strange melon-shaped lute one picked out a melancholy tune.

Again the company gathered close, Jean roving here and there rather than mixing with them. Pierre thumped his fist in his palm. "Remember the Amboise massacre and beware. Bloody Catherine is most dangerous and I fear the weight of her vengeance less than measures to conciliate the Huguenot leaders—which are more than kind even while she massacres the lower classes. To the leaders her measures are conciliatory: she is generous, which she cannot be without treachery."

Clermont nodded and Pierre continued. "We are too apathetic and have ever been. Instead of waiting to be stricken down *en masse*, we must strike, but how rouse to the necessary pitch those emotions of the leaders which Catherine appears bent on soothing?"

Pierre growled for silence as a babel of noise burst forth. "Had she continued the persecutions a little longer and made them more severe, perhaps the leaders would have taken note and urged an uprising: but she grinds the common Huguenots beneath her dainty heel while condescending to discuss with their superiors the problems of State over the dinner-table."

Clermont paced up and down, in thought, going over his conversation with the Baroness, apropos the marriage she had mentioned.

Was Catherine truly desirous of joining the two religions, and would she keep her word in any of the promises she must of necessity exchange upon so auspicious an occasion? From what he had heard of her, she would not: but could he afford to miss the chance of her doing so?

"My men," he said, his decision made, "I have heard that to-night which may well mark a change for the better in our position, I suggest we disperse now and meet again in two nights, when I will give you a clear understanding of the position." Heads were pressed close as groups discussed this, and finally Pierre settled the question. "Two nights hence. Come, brothers, let us depart." A voice cried, "What shall we do with the spy?" but when they turned the man had disappeared, having very conveniently come to life and crawled out while the attentions were upon discussion.

With many a shrug the company left the room, followed by Pierre behind the Count and Jean. Outside, the vast catacombs showed black and silver under the light of the moon and the distant spires of Notre Dame vied with the Louvre for pre-eminence in the majesty of the night.

Not a light twinkled and the soft night air was invigorating after the closeness of below-ground, and as the Count walked home with Jean close behind him he reflected on the beauty of the night and the beauty of a woman.

Outside his hotel, he turned to Jean and held up two fingers to indicate two nights hence, then repeated it to show the hour, and spoke close to his

ear. "And be certain to whistle this." He whistled four clear notes.

Jean nodded, then shambled off. Clermont watched his tall form blend with the greater darkness, then entered by the small side-door, which he opened with his key, and soon he had retired and was asleep.

Jean increased his pace as he turned into the Pont-St.-Michael, and dived down a narrow alley-way leading to the back of Rene's premises.

Here he entered by a door slightly ajar and saw in the dim light of a single taper the figure of the old woman who awaited him, finger on lip. He tiptoed down a narrow stairway behind her and bent low to avoid the low beams of a narrow passage, then stood upright in a rectangular room where she paused.

"He, he," she chuckled as she bent over a form lying on a rough pallet on the ground, the light shaking as she laughed. Then she shuffled close to Jean. "The drug works. He, he, how it works."

Jean took the candle and bent over the sleeping man, and saw on the dirty pillow a face that was a replica of his own.

Then he straightened himself and set down the taper on a wooden barrel, took out his purse and tossed some coins into the old woman's apron. "Two nights hence I will come again. Be prepared." "Oh, lovely gold," she crooned, letting it trickle from one palm to the other. "Two nights hence it will be and he," pointing to the still form, "will have some more medicine. He, he, he." She followed Jean up the stairs and after his departure shot the heavy bolts, then returned beside the form downstairs and sat laughing.

Meanwhile, Jean emerged from the alley with a new tread and a new face. Gone the matted locks

and shaggy brows, gone the loose overall which had covered his smart, velvet-slashed tunic and trunk hose, and the belt of coloured leather that held a dagger in a jewelled sheath. His tall form was that of an athlete, his face pleasant though broad-nosed, and white teeth shone between his moustache and clipped imperial as he smiled amusedly. His powerful shoulders heaved in silent mirth, and he patted the overall that was bundled up with his facial disguise and carried under one arm, then suddenly was serious.

"What a to-do," he muttered.

Soon he emerged from a narrow street into the Louvre enclosure. The sentry at the wicket saluted smartly as he passed inside with jaunty tread and murmured after his retreating figure, "*Mon Dieu !* the Duc de Guise walks like a jungle cat."

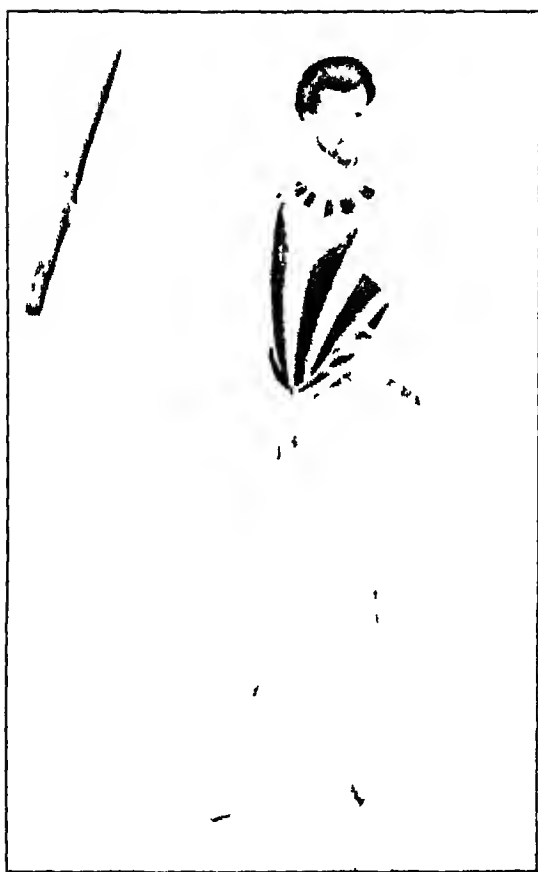
CHAPTER III

CHECKMATE

THE following afternoon was glorious. The sun sent bright beams into the room of Catherine-de-Medicis. It gilded the beautiful articles therein and touched her habitual mourning with sunshine, as she knelt on a carved prie-dieu before her private altar. She was asking a blessing upon her endeavour and raised her eyes to Heaven in supplication, her lips moving in prayer, 'ere she bowed her head and crossed herself, before rising. Her mood of the previous night, elation, still held her : her face was calm and her step brisk as she turned to the window and stood in the full light of the sun.

"The saints be praised. I shall succeed," she whispered. The small-paned window reached from floor to ceiling, hung with curtains of heavy purple velvet embroidered with fleur-de-lis and looped up with gold cords, finishing with golden tassels. To the left of the window, upon a raised dais, stood a high-backed chair, upholstered in rich purple velvet embroidered with fleurs-de-lis, matching a magnificent couch with high carved back, which stood to the right of the window.

A handsome small, round table, holding several books, stood in the centre of the room ; a thick carpet, black and purple, adorned the floor, and upon the walls were many fine portrait paintings and many curious weapons of offence and defence. The



HENRY, DUKE DE GUISE

altar, draped in black and bearing two candles, with the crucifix hanging on the wall between, stood between the window and the door on the left.

This communicated with her reception-room, and a door on the right led to her sleeping chamber. A smile upon her face, she seated herself and leaned back in the high chair.

She had much to do to-day, she reflected; try her reasoning with Marguerite and attend the dungeons to witness the torture of a prisoner. She had already requested Marguerite to attend her room later, and she meant to rise superior to any objections Marguerite might make to her proposals, without in any way disclosing her anxiety and keen desire to have none of them.

With this end in view, she decided to have help in the shape of Marguerite's cousin, Henry de Guise, who was staying in the Louvre: so she arose and went along to his rooms.

She found him reading and noted that he was somewhat pale—which she ascribed to an over-studious nature. She did not know he had slept but three hours the previous night when she looked up into his attractive face as he smartly stood at attention. De Guise had only recently returned to Paris, after his marriage, and was not only a handsome young man, but also a recognized leader of the Catholic Party. He was an avowed enemy of the Huguenots, particularly of one of Henry of Navarre's chiefs—the ageing Admiral de Coligny, whom he believed to have incited Polrot de Méré to murder his lamented father, Francis. He was in this matter of the Huguenots fully in the confidence of Catherine: indeed he had to be, for had he not known her ultimate intentions regarding them, nor of the terrible

fate into which she meant to trick them—he would himself have aided Marguerite to avoid marriage with Henry of Navarre.

He loved Marguerite so passionately that he had done a dastardly thing. He admitted it to himself, that in seducing the sweet young girl he had placed a sin upon his conscience that nothing could remove.

For he was the man she loved and the terrible upheaval of her emotions, the total wreck of her faith when he married a princess of one of the provinces—had been too recent for him to dare approach her.

So now, when her mother appeared in his room, he turned pale indeed ; and sighed with relief when she approached him with a smile and placed her hand upon his arm. She had in this young man a powerful ally. He had influence and standing in the Catholic Party and was more than ready to aid her plans for the total extermination of their enemies.

Catherine's plan of luring the chiefs of the Huguenot Party to Paris by proposing the marriage of Henry of Navarre and Marguerite-de-Valois, he had only consented to when Catherine assured him that the marriage would not be consummated. She intended to see to that with the aid of the Baroness de Sauve. De Guise, having so far forgotten himself as to desire Marguerite above all other women, hardly knew what to do or say when Catherine suddenly confided the reason for her call.

"I want you to help me with Marguerite this afternoon, Henry. I propose to speak to her regarding the marriage we have in view for her ; and lest she prove difficult and provoke me to a betraying anger, I want you to be present."

Torn between fear of a scene upon another score

and his great wish to see again the one who had aroused in him the deepest feelings he had ever known, or would know—he yet so managed to convey a wish for a ready compliance to Catherine's request that she took it for granted and patted his hand.

“In one hour then.” She smiled, and then bent over to look at the book which he had been studying. This was a treatise on the art of rearing and training falcons and goshawks: and as hawking parties were frequent at Court, were, indeed, the favourite pastime of her son, the King, Catherine paused to look through the beautiful illustrations. This book she put to tragic use at a time not far distant.

Meanwhile, Marguerite—who had been watching for an opportunity to get into the private apartment of her mother during her absence, had seen her departure and had immediately entered her suite, ready in case of inquiry with the retort that she had been requested to attend there.

She knew the hour appointed was not yet to hand, and hoped to make use of the extra time in finding a love token, a tiny royally garbed miniature in wax with her own initial embroidered on the velvet tunic, which her mother had removed from Marguerite's room. This she desired to re-possess for two reasons; one being that it might be recognised to have come from Henry de Guise, the other that she wanted to have and to hold this one reminder of the man whom she felt she would never cease to love, but whom she told herself she hated. She left the door into the private room of Catherine as she found it, ajar, the better to hear and be prepared for her mother's return. She swiftly searched the *escritoire*; then, disappointed, approached the table and turned over the books and papers, hoping to see what she

sought. Disappointed here, she crossed to the chair by the window, her white gown trailing over the carpet, and passed her hand along the back and sides.

Still she did not find what she sought, her lovely face clouded with tears, and she stood still, thinking.

Just a girl she looked and younger than her twenty years. Dark, curling hair covered her shapely head and made a fitting aureole for her lovely face and brilliant complexion. Indeed, so fair was her skin that often she wore a coiffure of pale golden curls over her own, so that the contrast should be less marked between hair and complexion, and yet more marked in that her beautiful dark eyes gleamed the brighter under a halo of fair hair.

Her figure, like a budding rose, gave promise of great beauty later, and with her white robe and whiter face she looked pathetic. She had recently had the most awful shock a young girl can have : she believed herself to have been callously and ruthlessly betrayed by the man she loved with all her heart—to have been taken lightly, where she had given in a beautiful seriousness that should have been respected.

The worst of it was she could not cast him from her thoughts and even now, as she stood, she was calling for him in her heart and needing the comfort of his presence. As she stood, she suddenly became aware of voices and started in alarm.

Catherine had been escorted back to her room by Henry de Guise and was reminding him that he was to accompany her to the Castle of Vincenne's after the interview with Marguerite. Marguerite was afraid he might enter with her mother, so she passed into the Queen's bedroom and stood behind the door, where she could hear when he left.

Then she would make some excuse for remaining hidden if she had to disclose herself.

So as not to actually listen she walked over to the bedroom window and looked out upon the courtyard and so was unaware that Catherine alone entered. Catherine sat down until Marguerite should appear, but a knock at the outer door quickly disturbed her reverie and in a few moments there was ushered in her Captain of Musketeers.

This man, François de Louviers Maureval, was tall and broad, with hard grey eyes above a strongly curved nose. He had prominent cheek-bones, and as he stood just within the door, with his plumed cap in one hand and the other fingering the hilt of his heavy broadsword, he looked what he was, despite his air of servility—a burly rogue. He had executed many private and obnoxious errands for the Queen : many a mangled victim had expired at his hands at Catherine's behest.

The thieves of Paris were not the only ones who used somniferous snuff to produce lethargy, for Maureval was adept at kidnapping both men and women by this means and conveying them to deep dungeon or distant convent, where they were powerless to continue to offend Catherine.

Many a girl was seduced by the means of this snuff and many an anguished soul found temporary oblivion, thereby.

Catherine's bold glance appraised the rogue before her.

" Well, what is it? " she demanded, and rose to face him.

It was too early for him to have come to escort her to the castle of Vincennes and she saw by his air that he had something to tell which he feared to say.

A furrow marked his brow and he kept his eyes downcast, yet she saw that he was consumed with a fiendish pleasure from the gloating way in which he ran his tongue between his lips. So she decided to encourage him.

"You know, Maureval, that the confidence I place in you makes you the first gentleman of my Court?" She seated herself complacently.

"Your Majesty," he said in a powerful voice, "I have news for you, yet fear to displease you."

"What is it? Speak."

Hearing an unexpected voice, Marguerite turned from the window and stood close to the door, where she could hear every word.

"I have spent all night wondering whether I dare. The woman whose identity you wished to discover is known to me," said Maureval.

"What!" Catherine started, from her chair, a wave of black rage flooding her mind as she remembered this woman and her hatred of her. "Her name."

"The Baroness de Sauve."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Her eyes blazed, then as suddenly became misty.

Charlotte, whom she had raised to the position of first lady-in-waiting, and to whom she had confided certain things regarding her thwarted affection and her intentions—could she but discover the woman who was keeping from her the man whose love she craved!

The shock left her weak for a moment; then, as she realized what this meant, a terrible anger filled her.

"Are you certain?" she asked, in a voice throbbing with feeling.

Maureval bowed to indicate his certainty, then said: "I am certain, Madame. I at once knew her for Count de Clermont's visitor when, last night, she passed out from Rene's—where I awaited you. There was no mistaking the cloaked form I have so often watched enter the Hôtel de Guise, to be received by him. I did not hope to learn her identity, nor would have done—had not the wind blown back the hood of her cloak."

"Revealing the features of the Baroness. You are certain?" She spoke meaningly, since she was aware of his hatred of the Baroness and the cause of it, and had no wish to be side-tracked to enable Maureval to pay a score.

"Certain, Madame."

The Baroness *was* at Rene's, she knew: had, indeed, left just after she herself had reached the secret door: but she did not confirm this to Maureval, nor did she intend to act as swiftly as he would expect. The Baroness was yet too vital to her plans to be speedily arrested and confined to prison—there to be left to the tender mercies of Caboche, the executioner of the Prévôte of Paris and a friend of Maureval's.

The repulsive, huge executioner and Maureval were great friends, both having the same cruel nature, the same sort of pride in their awful attainments and the same low instincts.

"Did she see you?" she commanded.

"No, Your Majesty. She was but too anxious to replace the hood to take note of my figure in the shadows. She looked perturbed."

"And well she might, if her forecast was as gloomy as her future is likely to be," said Catherine, vindictively.

She paused and paced the room, while considering

what move to make ; and decided to act upon the next visit of the Baroness to the Count de Clermont.

That this was due two nights hence she was aware, since the visits had occurred with unfailing regularity for a period. She reflected that, since the woman had gone unmolested for so long, she would—provided nothing occurred to arouse her suspicions—continue to do so. Catherine keenly desired to give cruel anxiety to this woman, whose intimate attachment with her daughter Marguerite she disliked lest she should prove a supporter of Marguerite in the trial before her, and to whom she had already shown some displeasure by her manner. She decided that it would do no harm to take the Baroness with her that afternoon to witness the torture.

“Maureval.” He stood at attention and she paused before him. “Two nights hence you shall accompany me and we shall pay the two a surprise call. We shall see how she acquits herself when face to face with the witnesses of her sin.”

She paused and took a turn up and down the room.

“The Baroness shall also accompany me to Vincennes in two hours. She shall learn a little of torture there and wonder if the same is in store for her. You catch the idea.”

Maureval grinned, bowed, and she continued :

“Would it give you satisfaction to apply some instruments to her delicate limbs ? ”

“Ah, Madame, I am indefatigable in your service.”

“Maybe the day will come—when I no longer require to use her. Work has been insufficient for you of late, but hearken ”—pointing a finger at him : “Set to work and prepare, for soon you will have your hands full, I promise you.” She dismissed him

with the words : " Have you prepared the ambush for the Admiral ? " Maureval bowed and smiled.

As soon as he had gone Catherine sank gratefully into a chair, to reflect upon what she had heard.

Malediction ! The duplicity of women, if Charlotte should be the secret mistress of Clermont.

Heaven's curse upon her ! Was she laughing at her mistress, joking with her lover upon his lack of reciprocity towards her matronly amour ?

" I can scarce believe it," she murmured. " Would she dare withstand me in this ? " Maybe the woman was enjoying her duplicity, and a hatred of her stirred Catherine to fury.

It could not be because Charlotte loved the man—people like her did not love, thought the angry Queen. Well, she would to-day see such a sight that would make her shiver with fear : dread the discovery of her duplicity and feel that such a fate would indeed be hers should Catherine find her out. She would take the Baroness with her to Vincennes, and watch the attitude of the woman and know if she must call her traitress.

She would not guess, thought the wily Queen, that Catherine knew, but had of her a greater need than vengeance : a need to use her to complete all her plans instead of frustrating one of them.

" But," she muttered between her clenched teeth, " the day will come when I have no further need of her : then we shall see her as she to-day shall see another—in all the agonies of the torture."

She paced the floor for a few moments, visualizing the scene : then, as she thought of the Count she stretched out her arms.

" Ah, Clermont, Clermont. You have taken my heart in your hands and know not what you hold.

Had I but met an answering gleam in your eyes, I could almost have sacrificed my aim to you—spared where I meant to crush. But now——”

She broke off. It was as well she had reached this point of hardness, she reflected : there was nothing now to hold her hand, nothing to prevent her carrying out her intention of passing him out with the rest.

Had he come to her sweetly and full of trust she *could* not have sacrificed him to her ambition and hatred : had he cared, her need of him and his of her would have been too great. Now, with anger to support her, she told herself that he well merited the fate she had planned for all Huguenots and would meet it—come what may.

“ Let me but have a little of his love and there shall be no turning back when the time comes for which I strive,” she said aloud : “ Ever has my heart cried out in vain for an all-consuming, fully understanding, passionate affection. *Mon Dieu*, am I so poor to behold as not to inspire ardour in the breast of one man ? Thou gavest the life, the nature that craves, the passions that but increase with the years : let me but have a little.”

She knelt for a moment. “ Dear Heaven, is it not enough I bear the burden of unrequited love, without this blow to love and vanity alike ? ’Tis frailty and inexcusable, but, oh, how sweet. I have lashed myself with scorn to cast his image from my thoughts, held up before my eyes all that should deter me ; still passion holds me, a tormenting flame that burns but does not destroy.”

Again she spoke, her voice a sibilant whisper : “ Of what service is power if it cannot gain me the passionate adoration of one man ? Give love and I

am satisfied ; without it, I am ever unsatisfied. Oh ! love, who wrapt me in a spell ! ” She wiped away a tear and composed herself ; then, rising, she left the room to seek the Baroness.

Scarcely had she gone when Marguerite came from out of her bedroom, her face ghastly, her eyes dilated with horror.

“ Poor mother,” she whispered : “ Caught in the toils, even as I.”

She staggered across the room and left the Queen’s apartments, returning to her own in such a condition as to alarm her lady-in-waiting, Gillonne.

Gillonne was the daughter of Jacques de Mantignon, Marechal of France, and the incorruptible confidant of her young mistress. She was well aware of Marguerite’s love for her cousin Henry de Guise—had, indeed, been the means of enabling them to meet in secret—before the break occasioned by Henry’s marriage to the Princess de Porcian—Infanta of Portugal, which had caused Marguerite great dismay and bitterness.

“ Why, Madame, whatever ails you ? ” she asked, as Marguerite collapsed in a chair. The poor, dear child had been very grieved of late, she reflected, and feared an illness ; so she hurriedly brought smelling salts and a glass of water.

Marguerite felt that what she had just undergone was the climax of all the trials she had recently had, but this was not the time for breaking under the strain. She had work to do—inform Charlotte that the sword of Damocles was suspended over her head : a small return for the kindnesses she had had from her. Something *must* be done, lest she lost this good friend and supporter : and, as she recovered herself, she thought out a way in which Catherine could be

tricked into believing Maureval had made a mistake. There was nothing else for it.

Meanwhile, the Baroness prepared for the visit to Vincennes, turning over in her mind the Queen's reasons for her desire and concluding that Catherine was trying her, testing her. Well, she should show no fear, she vowed.

Back in her apartments, Catherine awaited the coming of Marguerite. With Henry de Guise to support her and hold her in check, there would be no scene. Marguerite would be made to realize that she must fall in with her wishes and espouse the man chosen for her.

The appointed hour struck and Henry de Guise appeared. His manner was business-like and he appeared calm, collected and cold.

Catherine indicated the high-backed chair.

He crossed over to the window and stood there, lost in agitated thought. He was to see again the woman he loved, Marguerite—who had exerted herself to prevent his marriage because of what was between them, and who, in failing, had shown such signs of grief as to make him fear for her reason.

How she had upbraided him for the very thing she had craved. "You should not have taken me; you should have let me go, unspoiled, when you knew we could never marry. You have taken lightly and held cheaply what should have been highly prized—my virtue"—she had cried, pained with the realization that he could go and marry another woman without a thought, while she could not now marry another man without confession.

She had given herself to him feeling that it was a beautiful and sacred consecration of a future bond, a love of the spirit as of the flesh: and given of her



MARGUERITE DE VALOIS

inexperience, for in all that court of licentiousness, Marguerite, up till this time, had held herself aloof and unstained. She had accused him of taking advantage of her, and the words he had said in reply had shocked them both.

" I thought you understood, but you do not. You cannot realize to what an extent I could have imposed upon your inexperience. I could have led you so much further than I have done, could have debauched you and despoiled you of your sweet treasure : which—in your trust—was utterly mine, to do with as I would. I could have left you barren, or worse—enceinte ! "

He saw again her white face and big, staring eyes as she had looked at him a moment, horror-stricken, 'ere she covered her face with her hands and fled.

Now he was to see her again. Had she suffered, he wondered : had she called for him in her heart, as he for her ; felt the need of his arms around her, his lips upon hers ? A rush of feeling upset his calm : but he pulled himself together as Marguerite arrived and turned to look at her.

Catherine placed an arm round her daughter and drew her to the couch, where they sat.

Henry's eyes searched the face of the young girl, saw her extreme pallor, noted the downcast eyes and twining fingers and felt a great longing to comfort her—to hold her close, tenderly. He was lost to the first gentleness and chivalry which a young man feels for the opposite sex, but he had not forgotten it and knew that the equivalent in a girl takes the form of expecting gentleness and chivalry and that any lack of it stirs her heart to pain. He had, on the face of it, done a dastardly thing, he reflected : then again

excused himself by reminding himself that she had wanted his love as much as he wanted hers.

It was, of course, most unfair that a woman could not go on as before, must ever bear the mark, and he felt wretched about the whole business as he listened to Catherine's soothing voice, as she spoke.

"You look pale, dear child."

"'Tis nothing, Madame. A slight headache."

"I know what is wrong and have prepared for it. 'Tis time you secured a husband."

Marguerite bit her lip. She was very conscious of the figure of Henry de Guise by the window, but determined to ignore him and appear unconcerned.

"Oh no, Madame, 'tis not that, I have no inclination to be wed."

"Nevertheless, 'tis time and only natural. Having your welfare so close to my heart I have looked around and fixed upon one worthy in all respects to wed my daughter."

"Indeed, Madame, I thank you: but despite the consideration with which you honour me, I do not wish it."

Catherine had to strive to prevent her impatience from showing and was glad of Henry's presence in the room.

"The man," she continued, "is young and handsome as yourself, he has attained to the highest dignity: moreover, the match is necessary to the plans I have formed to protect and safeguard our country, our King, and you."

Marguerite nerved herself to pretend a complete ignorance of the man.

"The name?" she inquired, calmly.

"Henry of Navarre."

An incredulous look crossed Marguerite's face and she started to her feet.

"Oh, Madame, not Henry of Navarre. How can we reconcile love and marriage with the intense hatred that exists between his house and our own. Impossible."

"Impossible? Nothing is impossible," said Catherine calmly. "All is at peace between us. We are happily acquitted of any share in the death of his lamented mother, and as for the religions clashing, I am determined they shall not. Indeed, this marriage will put an end for ever to the war between the Protestants and those of our own faith.

That being so, 'tis well to start at the fountain-head. Furthermore, Navarre is a splendid heritage. Does it mean nothing to you that Henry of Navarre wears a crown?"

Marguerite held her chin high in opposition.

"I admit that the thought of wearing a crown appeals to me, but not that crown, Madame, not that!"

Catherine had difficulty in curbing her anger and rose.

"You are fanciful," she exclaimed testily. "Why, he is young, rich and powerful, all that a woman desires in a husband. A young woman of your years *should* be married, before Nature asserts herself. It *must* be Henry."

"Never, never," said Marguerite, and blanched at the terrible light upon her mother's face as anger almost overcame her resolution to be calm.

To be checked in her stride, to be forced to use subterfuge to this young thing before her, was gall to the haughty, domineering woman: and lest she betray the fact that it was not Marguerite's welfare

she was so concerned about she turned and approached De Guise.

"See what you can do with her, while I dress for our journey," she whispered, and going into her bedroom she closed the door.

Marguerite felt a powerful sensation when her mother closed the door, as though all feeling left her limbs and centred round her heart, which beat and throbbed as though wishful of being free to go to the man, who stood, hardly daring to approach. He did not know how she would be to him, loving or reproachful : and while he yearned for the one he felt he could not stand the other. As he pondered, she turned and faced him, haughtily, defensively ; but he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

Try as she would to prevent it, her eyes grew misty at his nearness.

She wanted him so much, but he had hurt her so badly.

He took a step forward, his young face lined with yearning, a hand held out in tentative approach ; but she bit her lip and turned her head away. He decided to be businesslike and recollected that he had to forward Catherine's plans.

"Be seated, won't you, Marguerite."

She sat down in one corner of the couch and he seated himself in the other.

Anxious to say something, he began—

"You should, I think, fall in with Her Majesty's suggestion."

Marguerite smiled bitterly and turned to him.

"Indeed ! What an unhappy creature I am. My heart given to a traitor to love and my hand to be given to an enemy from policy."

"I am no traitor to love, Marguerite."

"No? Well, I should scorn to wed where my heart can never be. We differ presumably."

"Now do be sensible," said De Guise. "I assure that my marriage is in name only. My wife's charms produce no effect upon my senses. I place myself in her bed as a matter of duty and frequently go to sleep without addressing a single word to her."

"Oh, how I hate you," said Marguerite, a loathing of his callousness filling her at his worldly-wise statement.

"'Tis easier said than done, you can never hate me," he replied. "You know you are filled with love of me; you would swoon in my arms—did I but take you, and hold you close."

He noted the increasing trembling of her lips and felt a thrill of mastery; but it was not to be as easy as he thought. Marguerite started to her feet, determined not to fall to the intense feelings which threatened to overcome her.

"How could you rouse in me this awful intensity of feeling. I did not fall easily, but in an agony of love that you did not either comprehend or value, apparently; yet you took me! I hate you for it: and because you have so cruelly broken my sweet dreams, I am finished with love." Her lips trembled so much it was an effort to speak.

"How you must have suffered," murmured Henry.

"Suffered!" cried Marguerite. "I have terrible moods of depression and of longing for you when I could scream. The sweet baby I have dreamed of bearing you in happy wedlock, comes to me at night-time, sits upon my bed—its chubby arms held out to me, its eyes beseeching me in a way that tears

my heart. For now it can never be born, the sweet and lovely creature that was to be the fruit of our love. Your treachery and deceit have crucified me with doubts of your love for me ; for if I cannot believe you sincerely love me and could not help taking me, under the urge of love's soul-stirring passion, I must believe you took me as one plucks a flower, to be worn in the cap for a day. That is what has almost killed me."

" *Mon Dieu !* how you love me."

" Not now. I only despise you ! "

" Don't say that, Marguerite. I shall always love you and treasure the memories you have given me. You know in your heart that there was no license, no pandering to pleasure, not even the assuaging of a vital need of each other."

" Oh I know, I know," burst out Marguerite, a strained look upon her face showing the effort she made to be calm : " you were forbearing, but your forbearance came too late. The deed was done before I ever realized the possibility of it. I was exalted and inspired by the ardour of true love. You left me bereft of what I held precious ; dishonoured and betrayed."

" Marguerite, you don't know what you say."

" I do. Honour is precious above all treasures, and where a man seduces he does not truly love. When love is not a virtue it is a vice. I would I had the courage to find in death the alleviation of suffering, but why should I die because of one man ? I feel all that a betrayed woman feels, I hate you, but——" she broke off, tears flowing down her cheeks. She gazed at him and her eyes grew tender.

" God help me, I love you, love you."

She turned away her head, and a great under-

standing and pity seized him. He approached and took her limp hand and caressed it gently.

"I see now that it was wrong to take you. I should have placed your sweet innocence above the intensity of passion your lovely trust inspired. But I thought it would make you happy. Confess that it did."

She made no movement and he continued :

"I believed you understood that princes of the blood rarely make their own choice in marriage, but marry for State reasons. Am I, because of this, to go through life unloving and unloved? Never! It was a sacrifice in itself and too much is not asked by Heaven of our human frailty." He paused, then turned her so that she faced him, taking her other hand and holding both in a strong clasp. She would not raise her head and meet his eyes, but he continued to look at her averted cheek as his words found expression.

"After a fierce struggle with myself I took you, Marguerite, but it was done in the eyes of God Himself, knowing He saw—not as in hiding from Him. That would have been shameful; as it is I do not think it was wrong, because we care for one another." She tried to remove her hands, but he held her—until at last she raised piteous eyes. He released her, conscious that she was clinging tight to her self-control, and watched her while she sat down upon the couch again.

Kneeling beside her but not touching her, he continued :

"Say you understand and will be happy again, Marguerite. It tears my soul to see you miserable. I love you intensely. You hold my heart, the heart that wakes me in the night, aching because of you."

"Don't, don't," she pleaded, and to conquer her desire to throw her arms round him, she again arose.

"My head bursts with confusion. I feel I shall lose my reason between the holding in of my love and my anxiety to avoid this marriage. Was ever a girl so cruelly placed."

She stood sobbing. Henry, drawn as by a magnet, placed his hands upon her hips, and as an electric current seemed to pass from one to the other, they swayed together, her dewy eyes met his for a moment and then closed. Her head fell back as sweet emotion overpowered her, and as he bent and kissed her white throat tenderly, her arms embraced him.

"God help me, Harry, I want you," she murmured. Her eyes, luminous in her pale face, seemed deep pools of desire in which, willingly, he would drown himself. He looked deep; anger melted, and Henry moaned, "*Mon Dieu!*" as he steeled himself to resist, while emotion rioted through his veins.

As her previous resolutions fled before the advance of the love she had denied, Marguerite yielded her lips to his hungry kisses and half swooned in his arms.

Henry picked her up and carried her to the couch, where he laid her down and knelt beside her. Bending over her prostrate form, he clasped her, close to his heart; kissing her lips, eyes, hair and bosom. Taking off her shoes, he placed his cheek to her feet, in abasement.

"What are you doing!" she whispered.

A beautiful, calm and happy feeling filled them both—they thrilled to each other's nearness and to the relief from the unhappiness caused by their parting.

"Forgive me, Marguerite. I had no right to touch

you. But, God help me, I want you more than ever now. Say you will love me again."

"What of your wife? Would she hate me if I did—as the supplanter in your affections—stealing that to which she is entitled?"

"Of course not. She would be glad I was beloved by so sweet a person. She may herself have fallen to another—we all have these problems to face and our own lives to live. Oh, Marguerite," clasping her, "forget that I loved and had to leave you. Remember only that you confessed you cared and gave yourself to me. We are but human and the strain of withholding tells. Don't drive me to the women of the Court."

For a moment Marguerite did not comprehend, then as realization came she clasped him. "Not that. Never that."

They kissed each other, as two children in trouble will do, their tears mingling; then Marguerite wiped her eyes and sat up.

"I can fight it no longer. I love you, love you, love you, and I, at least, belong only to myself." She gazed into his eyes, her own filled with a passionate yet almost maternal look of yearning to have and hold him from and against the world. In her heart she knew that the greatest and finest thing would be to be just friends, a bond of understanding between them in which the sex attraction was keenly alive but rigidly held in hand: a more ennobling and lasting bond than a love which could not be acknowledged before the world.

But her thought for his protection and the palpitating emotion that lay between them, crying for expression—blinded her to all but her love and she yielded herself to his arms, her lips clinging to his.

The world was forgotten, time stood still for them, as pent-up affection found its outlet ; then Marguerite lifted her hands and caressed his cheeks, while gazing into his eyes.

" Oh, isn't this wonderful. You lovely thing." She kissed him again—so happy to have him near : and he caressed her hair gently and murmured loving words.

" To-night," she whispered, put on her shoes and then arose, drawing him after her.

Henry remembered how Gillonne had drawn up by a cord the rope ladder by which he had previously ascended to Marguerite's room overlooking the fosse : and to-night he would go forth, armed with the familiar necessities which avoided any chance of being seen entering her suite at dead of night by way of the corridor in the Louvre.

" I sigh for the moment," he said, then turned his mind to more serious matters, while holding her close. " Regarding this proposed marriage of Henry of Navarre, Marguerite, I am certain you will be well advised to agree."

" Please don't," she murmured. " How can I contemplate wedding another when all my thoughts lie with you ? "

" But, my darling, all my thoughts lie with you, yet I have sacrificed myself for certain reasons which do not prevent my continuing to think of you, to need you and to love you." They clung together a moment, Marguerite in troubled thought, yet conscious of the beautiful peace in this lovely human contact with the man she loved, whom she had suffered for and longed for. His very presence had a healing effect, yet she *could* not do as he suggested.

"I cannot, will not, do it. Don't ask me to, Harry."

"But why not?"

"Why, because to wed another would be treason to my love, and to love you after I had wed another, would be to dishonour my marriage bed." She shook her head firmly.

Henry was placed in a dilemma. He could not tell Marguerite that the marriage was not intended to be consummated, because she would then say all the more reason for not marrying, and wonder what portended. Nor could he tell her that as soon as Henry of Navarre was her bridegroom, the final plan, ending in his death, would be put into execution. While debating in his mind as to what reply to make, Catherine returned. She had prepared for the road in a fuming passion; but had controlled it now, and was hoping that Henry had been more successful than herself.

"Trust a handsome man to be effective," she thought. "You may go, Marguerite," she commanded, and watched her daughter depart, then turned to De Guise and murmured: "Well, Henry. What success did you have?"

"She remains stubborn, I fear, Madame."

"Very well, she shall have no peace until she consents. Come!"

Together they left the room, Henry a prey to conflicting feelings—Catherine filled with the determination to reach her goal at any cost.

The sight of the Baroness's face at Vincennes ought to prove an amusing sight, she thought, and chuckled inwardly.

CHAPTER IV

THE CASTLE OF VINCENNES

THERE was a certain grandeur about this colossal pile, which the Baroness noted as they approached. The once grey stone, black with age, had a forbidding air, and well might people say, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter." High walls, loop-holed and commanded by platforms furnished with heavy arbalests, surrounded the court and squat low-ranged buildings: and underneath ground level were many subterranean passages leading to dungeons, where illustrious prisoners had rotted and starved before the eyes of their inhuman jailers. A heavy donjon rises, majestically, one hundred feet in the air, with innumerable tiny window embrasures and narrow passages, twining and intertwining in an amazing fashion.

At the postern of the prison the party stopped and one of the attendants, M. de Nancey, alighted from his horse, unlocked the padlock and invited the party to enter. They crossed the drawbridge under a spacious arch and entered, M. de Nancey and Maureval leading, and followed by Catherine, the Baroness, the Duc de Guise, and the attendants.

These latter were left at the foot of the stairs, while the others proceeded up them and through a long corridor, which led to the chamber of torture. This large chamber was bright with the ruddy glow from a fire which revealed all the implements of torture:



A HUNT IN THE FOREST OF VINCLNNE

pitchers and trestles for the torture by water, wedges and mallets for the torture of the boot ; and fixed above and below the stone benches against the walls were iron rings which secured the unhappy wretches awaiting the question.

The Baroness shuddered as she looked around. Those planks, she knew, were placed either side of a prisoner's legs and all tightly bound with cord, then the wedges were introduced and hammered home with a mallet. Six wedges were used in the ordinary question, ten in the question extraordinary, less than which would crush the flesh and break the bones of the unhappy captive. The torture by water was worse, if anything, for the prisoner had to swallow the contents of three tubs of water, holding twenty pints: ten pints in the ordinary question and another ten in the question extraordinary.

The prisoner about to suffer was a woman, who was condemned to death, but who was to be tortured in the endeavour to make her reveal her accomplices : and as she made her appearance followed by the awful figure of Caboche—naked to the waist—the Baroness set her teeth. The customary procedure was very terrible. The public had not much protection from law, consequently the greatest deterrent to crimes of any description was the certainty of a dread punishment to follow.

Although no truly good person would commit a crime for any cause, however strong or just, Catherine's policy, like most rulers', was " Might is Right " ; and it was to some extent necessary. She was dogged by a fear of the overthrow of her religion and the Throne, a fear that assumed gigantic proportions to her unbalanced mind.

She felt herself threatened by those of the

Protestant faith and took steps to wipe them out : she felt herself opposed by the Baroness and took steps to put fear into her heart. She now approached the woman :

" Woman, you have been tried upon the score of plotting against the life of his most Gracious Majesty, Charles IX, and found guilty. Have you anything to say in extenuation of your offence ? Answer me ! "

As the woman remained silent : " Confess ! Tell me your name ! "

" I have already refused it."

" Where were you born ? "

" It is useless to ask."

" Do you persist in denying you are implicated in a plot against the King ? "

" I do deny it."

" What—when documents have been found to prove that a Huguenot plot is afoot ! Enough ! "—angrily turning to Caboche—" Proceed."

Caboche uncovered the tubs of water and then seized the prisoner, stripping her of most of her garments and leading her up to a stool two and a half feet in height. He pushed her so that she sat upon it, then fastened each of her feet to iron rings in the floor and bent her body back over to secure her hands in a similar manner ; her head and feet thus nearly touched the floor, while the middle of her person was upon the stool.

Caboche then filled a horn with two and a half pints of water, placed the horn in the woman's mouth and compelled her to drink by pinching her nose. She preserved a stubborn silence between the pourings, excepting an occasional moan and the exclamation, "*Mon Dieu !* you are killing me."

In doses of two and a half pints, the first ten pints were soon absorbed : and, this having produced no effect and no confession, Caboche brought forward a higher stool, which he placed under the prisoner, instead of the other. The unhappy sufferer thereby described a higher arch and the blood flowed from wrists and ankles as the ropes cut more deeply into the flesh.

" You are tearing me asunder. Lord have mercy upon me," groaned the woman, and as the pouring continued the Baroness began to feel faint. This was but the beginning, she knew, and wondered how she would stand all of it. How could she bear to see the torture of the boot administered and the possible further torture of tearing out the tongue.

Despite herself she grew pale ; but, finding the cruel gaze of Catherine upon her, she murmured—

" How hot it is."

It was indeed hot, Catherine reflected, and not being desirous of seeing any more, the effect she wished having been produced, she turned to leave.

Charlotte sighed with relief and the party moved out, while Maureval took the opportunity to have a word with Caboche.

" Dainty wench, isn't she ? " pointing to the figure of Charlotte. Caboche put his head on one side and looked cunningly at his friend, his tongue lovingly rolling between his lips. Then he nodded.

" Well, what do you recommend for a wench who disdains the great Maureval ? "

" Disdains Maureval ! She must be a fool not to know all men are the same, really. Some go about conquests one way, some another, but all men are

animals ; and 'twere unfair to judge by the exterior, what ? ”

“ Ho, ho, well said. Now surely you prefer some instrument above the others ? ”

“ He, he. I have a favourite in these as in other things we know of. This.”

He handed Maureval a thumbscrew. “ This would do to begin with.”

“ Nay, to finish. You would not render a lady quite useless, eh, Maureval ? ”

Both laughed so loudly that Catherine and Charlotte heard and wondered at the reason for it. Charlotte hoped she had borne the trial well : Catherine thought surprisingly well, but she had another shock in store for her.

“ Maureval tells me our good Abbé Pierre Gondi has quitted this life—in haste.”

“ Oh no, Madame, surely not. I saw him in health only recently.”

“ Of a poison, I hear,” said Catherine.

“ Oh, the poor little Abbé,” sighed Charlotte. “ Poison ? ”

Catherine nodded, affecting a sadness she was far from feeling.

“ What particular poison ? ”

“ That I know not,” said Catherine.

“ I wonder how he looks,” continued the Baroness. “ I must go and see him. Perhaps I shall be able to tell from his appearance. For instance, some poisons distort the features in agony and are easy to name. Others make no disturbance, outwardly, so that the victim appears asleep.”

Her words aroused the curiosity of Catherine, as the Baroness intended that they should.

She knew that Catherine was familiar with most

points connected with poisons, and the success of her plan depended upon a visit by the Queen to view the body.

“ I shall go and make certain,” thought Catherine, and Charlotte knew that she had succeeded in her aim as she watched Catherine’s face. Then, as though in grief for the Abbé’s untimely end, she bowed her head ; but in reality it was so that Catherine should not see her eyes and know how she had been duped.

CHAPTER V

A BID FOR LIFE

THE Baroness had reason to congratulate herself and did so very heartily when she regained her room after returning to the Louvre. The plan she had proposed to the astounded Abbé had passed off without a hitch and there remained only one more trial for the honest fellow before—provided he passed through successfully—he should be well on the way to a Cardinal's hat. She had conveyed to him that morning the bottle of poison, had told him how nearly he had met the fate intended by Catherine and solemnly explained to him the only way she could propose whereby his life might be saved.

They had enlisted the aid of a good friend of the Abbé's—who had witnessed the first part of the play with which they proposed to outwit Catherine and who had himself given out the news of the Abbé's untimely end when the last scene was set.

The first part necessary had been to pour away part of the contents of the bottle, to put another portion into a glass, and to have the Abbé's apparently lifeless body discovered. Ultimately, in conjunction with the plans of the Baroness, it was conveyed to the church of Beaujeu. A coffin was procured and placed in the vaults where the Abbé could conveniently get in and out of it and so not

be condemned to lie in it until footsteps in the church warned him of approaching visitors. Charlotte had also warned him that it was essential to their plan that Catherine paid a visit to view his body and promised to endeavour to warn him of this beforehand : but making him understand that he should not presuppose that any footsteps he heard would be her own, as she might not get to him before the Queen.

However, as it happened, Catherine was delayed in setting out, consequently the Baroness arrived first at the church. It was early evening and she stopped her litter at some distance from the church and bade her attendants wait, while she continued the journey on foot.

Arriving at the church, she crossed the choir and commenced the descent of the stone stairway leading to the vaults. A sinister, uncanny silence pervaded the place : it was dusk in the vault and the arched roof was lost in the general blackness.

She could see the central pillar with the square base near which the open coffin, containing the body of the Abbé, lay ; amid other coffins, piled one above the other. An eerie light penetrated from a small air space and across this flew a bat, disturbed by her visit and looking, in the ghostly light, like a figure of evil omen. The Baroness shuddered and felt her way about, searching for an uncovered coffin. How still everything was, no sign of life apparently. It was as though the Abbé were indeed dead and quite unaware of her presence.

" Pierre," she whispered, " Pierre."

In the dim light she saw his figure arise from a coffin just at her feet. Wraith-like it rose and she had a sudden horrid premonition that so death would

one day face her. All that was required to complete the illusion was the grinning skull, and she felt her knees tremble even as a wave of thankfulness—that this *was* the Abbé—passed over her.

The lid leaned against the base of the pillar and she, too, leaned there, as a sudden faintness overpowered her. She quickly rallied, realizing that their only danger lay in being unsuccessful with Catherine, so she gathered up her resources and pressed home the points she had previously outlined.

“Now remember, Pierre, when she comes, to play your part well, as though recovering from a state of coma, as if returning from the borderland of death. Make it convincing and do not omit to let her know you have returned to life with a readiness to do her wishes.”

The Abbé, looking very mournful and very pathetic with his feet in a coffin meant to contain his dead body, shook his head sadly.

“Is a life worth saving which needs to employ such strategy?”

“Most emphatically, yes,” said the Baroness kindly, laying her hands upon his arm. “Forget the means and remember only that the means justify the aim—which is the preservation of your life. Live for me, Pierre. I have need of your aid and sympathy.”

The young Abbé was filled with conflicting emotions: to live or not to live? He did not much care which, to tell the truth, for it was heavily upon his conscience that he was unworthy of his high calling. Yet he did not reproach the beautiful creature who had caused his fall, his nature was too infinitely tender and forgiving for that: but he felt weary and in a maze and disliked intensely such a

means of saving his life. The fight was too much for him, clinging as he was to his ideals : and rather than become a worldling, with worldly aims and ambitions, he had felt inclined to give it up.

However, such was his desire to be of service to mankind that at the very mention of being of use to the woman before him, he resolved to carry the plan through.

She watched him and visualized the inward struggle—and even as he decided she smiled graciously and tremulously. “For me, Pierre. Stand my friend as I assuredly stand yours, and forgive me that I caused you to break your vows. I had not the excuse of loving you then, but I do care now, in the right way, and I would atone for my wantonness. Let us be friends.”

The Abbé let his mournful gaze rest upon her fair face as she considered : and finally he decided and smiled in token of his acceptance of the gage she had thrown to him. He would see it through, stand up to fate, and trust to the higher powers to help him despite the ignorance of the true life that produced the circumstances, wickedness and tragedies that made life hideous.

Pitiful in the untried ignorance of youth, he had fallen to the wiles of cold experience—that cares naught for the terrible conflict in the inexperienced breast yet, when convinced of the wrong it has done, cries “Forgive,” and expects to receive absolution to fit the compassion it never thought of giving. How easy it is to say “forget ” and “be strong,” when youth’s passions have been roused to a great height and left stranded.

God pity man’s inhumanity to woman and woman’s to man, for it can come to pass that the greatest sin

is in withholding. The Abbé reflected thus while gazing on that fair, thoughtless face, and in his heart he pitied her and forgave.

They clasped hands, a bond made between them.

"You have this one chance to regain all you have deemed lost and to make peace with Her Majesty. Thank you, Pierre, but never forget that for the future you have no conscience, no humanity of feeling, no soul but according to her dictates."

"Either false to my convictions or suffer the loss of all I desire and aspire to—even life itself." He sighed heavily. "I cannot fathom Her Majesty's mind. I but expressed my belief that she need not give her daughter in marriage to a heretic to establish before all the world the superiority and supremacy of our blessed Creed."

"Nor can I fathom her mind," said Charlotte. "I had rather she had driven the Huguenots from France. But in dealing with the Queen the convictions of others take second place. You should have dissimulated in Her Majesty's presence and used your influence with the King."

"But the Queen is the virtual ruler. Every one knows that. Moreover, *she* proposed it to me."

"And all you did was to uncover yourself. You have not yet learned the tricks of Court, but believe me, more is achieved by strategy than by direct assault or opposition."

"Such devices are foreign to me."

"I know, Pierre. I know your simple, honourable nature, to which this must appear as low scheming: but I honestly counsel you to this course."

"Surely death were more glorifying?"

"Nay. I would I could be sure of saving myself by so simple a means."

Marguerite had informed her of the worst.

"You, too, in disgrace?" he queried.

"I fear so, but I face it and scorn no means of outwitting Her Majesty. Now lie down and remember you *must* live. You might do so much that is worthy."

"Yes, something that will far outweigh this enforced deception."

He lay down and the Baroness arranged his robe, whispered "Adieu" and was gone. In the silence her footsteps could be heard ascending the stone stairway up which she had to feel her way, as darkness had fallen. She hurried to her litter and returned home by another way, fearing her litter would be recognized if she passed Catherine as she left.

As it happened, Catherine was approaching and carrying a weapon with which to cut the arteries of the man, lest he be only in a trance. The Queen meant to be quite certain; and, upon arriving at the church, she lit the small hand-lamp she had brought with which to view the body.

Many a body had Catherine viewed in all the abandon of death, 'ere this: yet, such was the complexity of her nature, she no sooner removed an enemy from her path than she was smitten by a still greater fear, lest, in looking upon the still corpse, the form of Jesus enshrined within every mother's son, as was Jesus in His Blessed Mother, should arise and confront her with the results of her jealous self-care.

Meanwhile, the Abbé felt himself drifting in shadows, as though he had indeed quitted life. The cold chill of the vault gripped his limbs, they stiffened: his pale face grew paler and he slipped into a semi-consciousness like unto death. He tried to pierce

the darkness, to take an ocular grip upon his surroundings and suddenly became aware of a shuffling noise in the deathly quiet. Soon a light appeared. Catherine had descended and the Abbé saw that her face was grim in the light of the lamp in her hand. She glanced swiftly round and felt an uncanny sensation.

"What is this fear which fetters my limbs. The dead can do no harm," she muttered.

The light fell upon the open coffin and she placed the light upon the base of the central pillar and bent over it. "'Tis not easy to believe that death has claimed him—death and I." She paused and involuntarily shuddered.

"Come, banish your chimerical fears," she taunted herself. "Catherine must not shirk. I can take of the dead what the living denied me—his hand. To cut the veins will be easy, though sacrilege: but 'twill make doubly certain."

She withdrew from her pocket and held in her right hand the sharp instrument she had brought for the purpose and lifted up the limp hand with her other. She turned it over, exposing the blue veins in the wrist, and had poised the knife when suddenly the hand gripped her own.

Like the vision of a drowning man, all the awful secrets she kept buried deep in her bosom flashed before her inward vision in panoramic view, and she swayed as a faintness seized her.

A thrill of icy horror passed through Catherine: she remained transfixed, simply petrified for a moment—then the knife fell from her nerveless grip and her screams rang out as, for the first time in her life, her nerve failed her.

The icy hand still held her own and in her state of

hysteria she pulled in a frenzy to release herself : then, as the hand fell away, she regained her composure. A ghostly voice spoke.

" *Mon Dieu !* What a ghastly dream. Where am I ? A coffin ? "

She watched while the figure in the coffin moved and tried to sit up : and comprehended that her visit had put an end to a state of coma into which the poison had apparently sent him. Her sharp wits recovered as she realized all was well.

Either Rene had failed her or a miracle had occurred, she decided : and put out a hand to help him sit up.

" Stand forth my deliverer," cried the Abbé. His rocking figure became upright, he opened his eyes and looked upon the Queen in the dim light. " Ah, let me re-enter the shades if I but return to meet your just anger, Your Majesty," he said.

" Ha. Then you admit it to be just." She felt that it would be worth while to have had the shock of her life if it had also brought a willing helper in place of a stumbling-block.

" Madame, since I am spared and recovered from the deep lethargy—like unto death—which has resulted in my being here, I will willingly testify to my error, caused by an over-anxious zeal."

" The destiny of our country is not in your hands, Abbé, nor do you know sufficient to enable you to guide it : but you might be of service to your country through me."

" It will henceforward be my life's endeavour to support Your Majesty."

" In everything ? "

" In everything. I bow to superior knowledge as to higher rights. Only thus can I redeem myself

in the eyes of Heaven—which inspires your policy.”

“ And in my eyes. I am but a weak woman and I rejoice to find you a ready supporter. I have work for you. Arise.” He stiffly stepped from out of the coffin, then picked up the lamp and held it while they ascended the stairway.

Catherine spoke. “ You shall have the opportunity to establish yourself in my favour. Instead of preaching that those of the reformed religion are Heretics and outcasts from our Church, we shall make known that they are our brothers ; encourage them to mix freely with us, in peace. The marriage of my Marguerite with Henry of Navarre will do much to ensure it. Can I rely upon you ? ”

“ You can, Madame,” replied the Abbé and set a seal upon his promise to the Baroness. The party then returned to the Louvre, the Abbé with his face bravely set in a new direction, Catherine filled with triumph at her success ; but a success which, had she known its birth, would have mortified as much as it now pleased her.

CHAPTER VI

A STEP GAINED

CATHERINE slept soundly that night, filled with a glow of satisfaction. No midnight perambulations for her to-night, she wanted a good rest to restore her nerves for the part she had to play the following night, when she meant to give the Baroness the shock of her life.

Revenge would be sweet, and she slept with a smile on her face—in the reverse to poor Charlotte, who tossed and turned, filled with troubled dreams and doubts for the future. Not till morning was she to know of the success of the Abbé's deception, and even then this gratification was overshadowed by a greater test still to be made. Marguerite had proposed a certain course, to which the Baroness had strongly objected, but upon which she could not herself improve.

She had, perforce, to give way, much as she disliked it;—while acknowledging that if it was successful a great fear would be removed from her mind. Count de Clermont had only consented to his part in it because of the relief it would bring the Baroness, and so, when nightfall brought the crucial time to hand, the stage was all set.

The suite of the Count, in the Hôtel de Guise, was plainly furnished. The door, leading on to the narrow landing, opened into the sitting- or writing-room, which in turn opened into his bedroom.

On either side of the central fire-place in the sitting-room, were upholstered chairs; above the mantelshef hung an elaborate mirror, and a table, with paper-rack and ink stand, completed the furniture. The bedroom contained a fourpost bed, with a small table near and a huge closet.

Sitting upon the bed were two figures in an attitude of tense listening—the Count de Clermont and a masked, cloaked woman.

Outside, in the landing, Catherine-de-Medicis stood with Maureval.

“You are certain,” she asked him.

“Certain, Madame. She entered.”

“Very well, we shall confront them.”

She opened the door and stepped into the room, closely followed by Maureval, to whom she signed to remain by the door. As she crossed over to the bedroom, the two figures upon the bed embraced, then started apart as she suddenly flung open the door. The Count started to his feet, the woman remained seated, seeming to crouch down in fear. Approaching in a stately anger which she held in check, Catherine looked sorrowfully at the Count.

“You may go. I shall acquaint you later of my displeasure that you should thus associate with my confidential woman.”

He took his dismissal mutely and passed by Maureval with his head bowed. He was fearful of the results of the plan to which he had agreed, in case it retarded his progress with Catherine: yet he could do no other than play his part and leave the rest to the other players. He remembered his assignment with the Huguenot conspirators and cursed impatiently while waiting for the party to leave his rooms. From outside the hotel he looked up at the lighted

windows and in his mind's eye pictured the dramatic scene.

Catherine was speaking.

"So, Baroness, it is true. Traitress, what have you to say to me, what apologies to offer." Having no reply, she continued, "How vile a thing you have done only you and I know and God—Who has borne witness to my sufferings. Had you no shame, no pity? Speak," she commanded, anger gripping her. "Speak your justification 'ere I tear it from you."

The figure crouched lower and Catherine felt a destroying anger.

"Here," she called to Maureval, and he hastened in, a malicious grin upon his face. Catherine pointed. "Strip the mask from her face. Let us see the effect of our entry upon the haughty sinner." As Maureval moved toward her, the woman sprang from the bed and darted across the room in a vain attempt to avoid him. He grinned maliciously as he brought her to bay and seized in his arms the woman who had scorned him, holding her tight a moment in loathsome personal satisfaction 'ere he gripped her hands and pulled the mask from her face. Catherine leaned forward to see the expected fear upon the face of the Baroness, but, to her horror, the face of Marguerite was revealed.

Catherine gave vent to a piercing cry. "You—my own child."

Her staring eyes looked into the equally staring and fearful eyes of her daughter—who stood, pale as a lily, showing every sign of guilt. That she was guilty in an entirely different aspect Catherine did not know—she believed the evidence of her own eyes, as it had been intended she should. Contrary

to expectation, however, she did not pass it over lightly.

The conspirators had imagined that Catherine would spare no time in taking Marguerite back home with her, reading her a lecture and seeing that she had no contact with the Count for the future : but they had not reckoned upon the terrific, inner force of the woman, a force that held a destroying element when roused to such a pitch by the emotions of love, hate and vengeance. Now all three combined within Catherine in a raging torrent that demanded outlet and, white with passion, she ordered from the room the startled Maureval.

He shrank away, glad to quit the scene of his terrible mistake, while wondering however it had occurred.

" Fool, to let me do this," Catherine hissed as he passed her ; then, as he closed the outer door and stood in the passage in agitated thought, Catherine gazed at the pale Marguerite with a look denoting both anger and sorrow. Marguerite kept her eyes downcast ; nervously she threw back the hood of her cloak and loosened the neck-band as though craving air.

" My God, child, do you know what this means." Marguerite stood mute. " That I, your mother, should find you here. Is this the man you love ? "

Marguerite quailed before her fierceness, her lips twitching.

" *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu,*" moaned the Queen, " I have suckled a viper who has turned and struck, robbing me of all I hold dear. Wretched woman that I am to bear at heart the same love as my child." She struck her breasts with clenched hands. " How

can I bear it. Oh, God, ease me of this strain lest I go mad."

Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed hysterically, almost insanely, then again she beat her breast as she paced the room. Stopping before Marguerite she demanded, in a voice broken by emotion, "What do you know of love: what is there in your puny nature to satisfy such a man, to return him passion for passion. Wretch, with your pallid child's face and budding form, you have robbed me."

Tears sprang into her eyes as she strove to hold her warring emotions in check; and as she beat them down the tears fell unheeded.

"What a fiend is this jealousy which tears my vitals," she whispered. "The burden of love was enough in itself—without this primitive passion, which bids me 'Kill, Kill' as the other cries 'Love, Love.'"

She walked the room in an agony, forgetful of the other occupant, who stood horrified and not daring to move. Again she spoke, as if to herself. "I, who have known all other pains, including the terrible travail of childbirth, do swear that the pain of jealousy is the hardest to bear. Ease me, oh Lord," she almost prayed.

Casting off anger, she suddenly stopped before Marguerite. "Do you love this man so much?" A sudden compassion for all women in the throes of agonized desire—love's physical manifestation—made her voice husky. In her heart she cried, "Merciful God, help me to be strong." She had borne so much and more was to be asked of her, another burden was given her.

Marguerite's glance roved wildly about the room, she did not know what to say.

"Do you?" repeated Catherine more gently and stirred a deep repentance in Marguerite.

"Oh, Mother," she pleaded, "do not ask me. I am here."

"You must love him, deeply, to be found in his bed-chamber in so flagrant a breach of propriety and etiquette. Openly contend with you I will not, but this man is not for you. I shall, indeed, go mad unless I have some satisfaction for the pent-up, wasted years of cruel repression. You shall see him no more!"

"Very well."

Marguerite's promise was so ready as to arouse her mother to the suspicion that she would promise anything to escape. A promise given lightly would be held lightly, thought Catherine; and was again stung to anger at the thought of a continuance behind her back.

"You are very ready with your promises, but you shall not escape thus easily with a lie, nor so seek to placate my wrath, Oh!" Anger arose anew and she gripped her hands: "What shall I do to you?"

Marguerite piteously wrung her hands.

"Forgive me, I did not know," she cried.

"Half the sinners in the world cry out as you, 'I did not know.' The way to hell is paved with tablets bearing the words," replied Catherine scornfully, casting a baleful glance at the stricken girl.

"I swear I shall see the Count no more. Don't be angry," Marguerite continued.

"Angry!" Catherine towered over her daughter. "Angry," she said again, and slapped Marguerite across the face, the pent up anger thus finding outlet.

A terrible cry burst from Marguerite.

"Kill me, kill me," she cried brokenly, at the end

of her strength : and with that she collapsed in a heap upon the floor. As she did so, the door of the closet was flung open and the Baroness came forth, the door clashing behind her, her face terrible in its tragic fear, her eyes black and distended in her chalk-white face.

" Stop, hear me," she panted.

The two women faced each other across the still form of Marguerite and a deathly silence reigned for a space. " I am the guilty one," said Charlotte, " she is innocent."

" What," whispered Catherine. " Then Maureval was right," she continued, in sterner voice, as she understood that a little play had been performed to deceive her and certainly would have done had she been less terribly in earnest.

Between them they picked up Marguerite and laid her on the bed. Her cloak fell to the floor and she looked very frail in her long white robe and very childish. The curls were smoothed from her brow and, as Catherine and the Baroness talked, they chafed her hands.

" You have allowed this poor child to take a blow merited by yourself : you who deliberately deceived, whereas she would have done it in ignorance if at all. What shall I name you ? " said the Queen.

Her eyes gleamed, more in bitterness than in anger. The anger had flown, relieved with the blow that she had struck and there was something so awfully pathetic in the cringing form of the Baroness that it struck Catherine with a new understanding of her power.

Charlotte, in her desperation to acknowledge herself and free Marguerite from any taint of suspicion, rose to great spiritual heights.

"In truth, Madame, I merit the worst. Do what you will to me, but I swear I did not know a woman could feel as intensely as you do, nor suffer as cruelly. God forgive me, what have I done?"

Catherine did not know that the Baroness was entirely sincere even now, while expecting that vengeance on the Queen's part would mean the end for her, but she decided to act upon the belief.

"You know of course what you should expect," she queried. The Baroness merely nodded, her heart too full for words.

"You admit that nothing I can do to you will recompense me?" Again Charlotte nodded. Catherine saw that she had the Baroness in the hollow of her hand and, as usual, she improved upon the situation and turned it to her own use.

She would give an appearance of great forbearance and forgiveness and earn the gratitude of the stricken creature before her. "If I overlook this, do you promise me an implicit obedience in all things, for the future?"

Charlotte, who had expected much worse than this, looked up in relief and gratitude.

"Oh, Madame, I assuredly do." A flood of happiness overpowered the poor creature and when Catherine told her to retire into the other room, she knelt and kissed the Queen's hand before leaving. Catherine gloated over this as she set herself to restore Marguerite. The Baroness was, indeed, her tool now, broken on the wheel of life; utterly Catherine's, body and soul.

She meant to make full use of both 'ere she gave the unhappy woman the *coup de grâce*. She picked up Marguerite from the bed and held her in her arms, like a child: and she was sitting thus, thinking

deeply when the Baroness returned with some smelling-salts obtained from the hotel manager. As she was leaving, it occurred to Catherine to test her.

"Stay," she commanded, and as Charlotte stopped and looked back again, she spoke again. "The name of the man Marguerite loves."

The Baroness was true to her promise.

"Henry de Guise," she said.

"Return to the Louvre and say no word of this to any one," said Catherine in dismissal, then sat, dumbfounded. "Henry de Guise," she muttered. "Fool that I was, never to guess."

She applied the smelling-salts and Marguerite stirred. Then, as consciousness returned she burst into passionate weeping.

"There, child," murmured her mother, conscious of a great sympathy for this, her baby, caught in the toils of love, even as she herself. "Do not weep, forgive your poor mother her hasty blow."

"Oh mother, it is not that," said Marguerite, between sobs. She was, in fact, getting rid of the accumulated pain of months, the pain given her by her lover.

Catherine held her close, soothing her while she recovered herself.

Marguerite's reconciliation to Henry had been too short and too recent to prevent a return to the bitter unhappiness of feeling, occasioned by their break, while Marguerite was in a low state, but as she recovered she put sadness behind her with the reflection that soon he would soothe away all pain and grief and make her happy.

Catherine was tempted to press her daughter to tell her all, but decided to say nothing about it since it did not actually concern her vital plans and could

still be made use of as a last resource. She did not imagine the affair had gone as far as it had, and had it crossed her mind to suspect what had actually happened, she would not have altered her plans in any way but have proceeded under the assumption that Henry of Navarre himself had "sown his wild oats."

Nor did she suspect Marguerite's affair of having in it any such misfortune as befalls so many young women before they know what is happening, and therefore she decided to ignore it and proceed upon the present position.

Marguerite, in ignorance of what had passed between Catherine and the Baroness, wondered what her mother would do; then, as Catherine spoke, she knew she was trapped.

"Of course, you know what this means if it reaches the ears of the King. You would be shut away in a convent, there to expiate your sins."

Marguerite had not dreamed of this. She had imagined that the Queen would wish to hide her knowledge of such an affair. She sat stricken.

"I could advise you, yet know you to be stubborn," continued Catherine.

Marguerite clutched at the straw.

"Oh, mother, I will do whatever you say."

"I suggest you marry Henry of Navarre."

The words burnt themselves into the bewildered brain of Marguerite.

She turned over, helplessly, all the other avenues she might have wished to take, but knew they were closed to her.

Catherine had pointed out the only path she would permit her to take. There was nothing else for it—for to be confined to a convent was the last thing

Marguerite could stand. "Your solemn promise," said Catherine and so Marguerite gave it, the promise that was intended to make her a widow 'ere she was a wife and which led to untold deaths of innocent persons.

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER STEP

MARGUERITE went to bed that night feeling numbed. The only spark of comfort lay in the fact that she had saved Charlotte, for not till later did she know all that had happened and realize how Catherine had tricked them both. Upon their return from the Hôtel de Guise, Catherine had immediately taken her to the apartments of the King, where the guards allowed them to pass.

The King was in bed and his faithful Huguenot nurse, Madelon, who had stayed with him since childhood, at first refused to disturb him. She tried to hold Catherine in the Cabinet des Armes, but Catherine commanded her to inform her son, the King, that the Queen-Mother wished to speak to him at once upon a matter of importance.

After a while, the voice of Charles could be heard, testily demanding to know why he was disturbed. "*Mon Dieu*, is there no peace for me?" The murmuring voice of the nurse was heard, explaining: then Charles himself appeared, his eyes sleepy, his sleeping wear covered by an ample robe.

"*Pardieu*, Madame, what is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "I am a sick man and you drag me from bed at this unearthly hour. More tales, I suppose."

"My son, regarding the matter of which I have spoken to you—the proposed alliance with your

sister to Henry of Navarre—I am here to tell you that Marguerite welcomes it.”

Charles looked happily at Marguerite, awaiting her assent : and as she was also aware of the threatening gaze of Catherine, Marguerite dared do no other than assume a happy air and smile.

Charles saw that she was pale, but did not know the cause, and reflected that perhaps the alliance would do much to make her happy as well as make peace between the two factions. Catherine had proposed it upon this latter ground and Charles had demurred, lest it be distasteful to his beloved sister ; but now, when she smiled, he embraced her heartily, believing she truly desired it. Catherine did not allow any further exchange of words. She apologized to her son for disturbing him, but he was quite gay to have been disturbed to hear news that meant so much to his dear Marguerite. He had no suspicion that anything was wrong and returned to bed in a happy frame of mind, while Marguerite was escorted to her room. Catherine dispatched a guard to keep watch and prevent any entrance by the Baroness, who was, as she guessed, waiting an opportunity to get into Marguerite’s room to talk.

Catherine shrewdly prevented this for that night, and when she lay at last in bed her thoughts were upon De Guise : his dissimulation and pretence. At last she slept ; but De Guise himself was preparing to leave the Louvre rather than indulging in thoughts of sleep.

He took, from the bottom of a beautifully carved chest, his familiar bundle and departed : and in the quiet of a lonely street transformed himself by the aid of a tiny mirror into Jean the idiot. Hastily traversing the streets and on the alert for Apaches,

he soon reached the city of the dead, where he adopted his stupid gait and air, and wandered close to the cave-like opening.

The scene was peaceful : the moon calmly looked down from the starry heavens and shed her beneficent light upon the roofs of Paris. As he expected, Jean saw a figure lurking in the shadows and began to whistle the four bars of music as instructed by the Count.

Another joined in whistling and the man came into the open, jauntily.

He pulled the arm of Jean, who smiled stupidly, and led him into the passage. "He, he," chuckled Jean as his guide uncovered a small lantern and led the way.

The other sneered. "Batty," he muttered, beneath his breath, and with a thrill of fear at the power reposing in the tall form beside him. Soon they approached the cave and the same scene as before was presented to Jean's eyes.

A heated argument was in process. Pierre and Clermont were having a wordy battle.

"God's death, how much longer are we to wait ?" said the former, thumping his fist into his palm. "Bloody Guise is sharpening swords by night to cut our throats and you say, wait." He spat, viciously.

Clermont raised his hand as voices broke in—"Are we to wait to be butchered ?" then spoke in a conciliatory tone.

"My friends, have patience. To make a false move now would ruin everything. How often have we struck while lacking in power to ensure complete success, only to suffer a grim and heavy retaliation ? Come, be sensible."

Pierre scowled more darkly. "Sensible ; when

we squirm beneath a woman's foot that spurs on the King to greater and greater measures against our endeavour to obtain our rights. I ask you, comrades, shall we withhold our hands ? ”

“ No, no,” came the answering chorus. The beggars were vastly amused by the scene, but Jean's eyes were sober. He shuffled over to Clermont and grinned stupidly at him. “ Ah, you have arrived.” He patted the nearest shoulder, then whispered to Pierre : “ Interrogate him.” Pierre smiled with understanding, then held out his hand to Jean.

“ What say you, brother ? ”

“ Eh, what ? ”

“ What say you to the letting of some hot Catholic blood ? ”

“ He, he. Blood ! Ah, the rivers shall flow red with it.”

“ Hurrah for Jean,” came the cry : but one asked another, “ As the son of Rene's servant, perhaps 'tis Huguenot blood he refers to.”

“ Nonsense, didn't Pierre say Catholic blood ? ”

“ You like money,” said Pierre significantly, and Jean nodded vigorously. “ Then see,” pulling out a purse of gold, “ this shall be yours if you will join us and rid us of the sorcerer, Rene, who by his magic supports and strengthens Queen Catherine and brings to an untimely end good Huguenots.”

“ Aye, poor Jeanne d'Albret, for one,” cried a voice.

“ True,” said Pierre to Clermont : “ would you let *that* go unavenged ? ”

“ There is no question of any of us forgoing revenge, but I consider the time is not yet ripe. Listen, all. I have it on good authority that Marguerite-de-Valois is proposed as the bride of our

Henry of Navarre. Now what say you to leaving the matter of revenge until *after* the ceremony and thereby ensuring legal right for our chief to this Throne of France ? ”

A muttering broke out as excited voices speculated, but Pierre was not satisfied.

“ Who says the marriage will take place, or that any of us will live to see it ? Pah ! I for one refuse to believe mere hearsay, which is the delusion of minds who for ever look for an excuse to avoid taking action. No ! brothers, everything is well forward. Are we not ready ? ” The crowd replied feebly and he continued :

“ There are arms hidden here for an army of thousands of brave Huguenots. See.” With a dramatic gesture he ripped aside the sacking at the far corner and disclosed a fearsome array of pikes, halberts, swords, daggers, and some harquebus.

Again the mutterings rose high, and as the beggars crowded to see they had to be driven off. No wonder a guard had occupied the cave for weeks, they thought, and licked their lips at the prospect of obtaining some of the weapons and levying toll upon late travellers. Jean’s eye gleamed, but he continued to look sheepish. “ Are you ready ? ” demanded Pierre, and the chorus assented, “ We are.”

Clermont held up his hand. “ I tell you it is premature. The chiefs are not ready.”

“ No,” shouted Pierre, “ they are paying court to the Catholics to obtain for themselves the favours denied to us. To hell with the leaders.”

Voices rose high and hands clutched for and obtained weapons.

Clermont tried again. "'Tis folly, men. Wait. What can you do without leaders? "

A few looked crestfallen. What, indeed, could they do!

"Now, men, I ask you to wait but one week. We meet here to-day week and I swear to have either the leaders' instructions or the news that all you have sought at Catherine's hands has been granted."

He paused while his words took effect. "All show hands who will wait," he cried, and almost to a man their hands reached into the air.

Pierre scowled, but forbore to say more to the masses, but he approached Jean and dangled the money before him. "Will you do it—rid the earth of Rene? "

Jean nodded vigorously, and the purse fell jingling into his palm.

Clermont approached him 'ere he had scarcely stowed it in his capacious pocket and together they were led out, Clermont in troubled thought and Jean with a gleam in his eye; leaving the others in violent discussion. He left the Count at his hotel as before, and made his way by devious routes to the Louvre—stopping on the way to bundle up his disguise. Hastening past the sentry he entered the guard-room and had the sleeping Maureval awakened.

The Captain hastened to dress and appeared quickly with the flush of sleep still on his face. He saluted smartly.

"You know the catacombs, Maureval? "

"Yes, Sir."

"Then take at once a *possé* of fifty musketeers and raid it for Huguenots! Care will have to be taken to keep together and approach quietly, and

as you go pick up Eugene—the spy. He is familiar with the cave I desire you to raid, at once: and since he was discovered to be a Catholic he will most likely be found in his bed.”

“Yes, Sir.” Maureval again saluted.

“Leave five men at the entrance lest any escape by the cross-passages, and make arrangements for the removal of a small arsenal stored within. Now, remember, not one must escape.”

He turned on his heel and again went past the sentry. Once again he adjusted his disguise and made his way to Rene’s.

Again the old hag admitted him. “Still asleep,” she croaked, and Jean dropped the purse of gold into her hand.

“’Tis finished,” he said. “Say no word of this to a living soul as you value your life and leave your son in ignorance.”

“Aye, your honour,” she replied, curtseying low, and as soon as he had gone she bolted the door and danced a few steps out of sheer joy in the money in her hand.

“Easy money,” she thought to herself, but little she recked of what had been achieved.

Jean, or, as we may now correctly name him who had posed as Jean—Henry de Guise—next stopped outside a sorry house, and threw pebbles at the bedroom window. In a few moments the sash was raised and the head of the escaped Huguenot—one of the Duke’s smartest spies—appeared.

“Just a minute, Sir,” he called, and the Duke stood close to the deep-set door which, in a moment, was opened.

“Maureval is on his way here. Lead him by the quickest route to the catacombs and catch the rats in their lair. Take your lamp.”

"Yes, Sir. I will dress at once. Better leave that disguise here, Sir." De Guise stepped inside and, in a moment, returned as himself. With his head well back and whistling a tune from the opera, he returned to the Louvre and found Maureval had already departed with his men.

"Now the devil look to his own," he muttered as, in fancy, he saw the conspirators brought to bay and dispatched in face of the cowering beggars.

He thought of Marguerite, but had made no assignment for to-night, for which he was glad—as he intended to sit in the Guard House till Maureval returned and hear the success of his coup. The room was warm and soon he was nodding, but a clatter outside brought him wide awake.

Out in the courtyard were the remains of the Musketeers: fifteen having lost their lives in the affray. Cornered, the Huguenots had given desperate battle, but what were their weapons against the muskets of trained men!

Yet some had escaped and been lost in the passages. The spy spoke up. "I think Pierre was one, but am not sure."

At once the mind of De Guise seized upon Pierre. He must make certain. Maureval was wounded in the face, the gash of a halbert clumsily wielded, and many of the survivors were in a worse state: so De Guise ordered Maureval call up twenty fresh men. "We will go and make certain."

Quickly the men appeared, and De Guise called for a horse, for he was weary. A fine animal was brought, without trappings, and he mounted and led the men at a trot. Dismounting at the catacombs he signalled the spy to lead the way. After lighting his lamp with his flint he stepped inside, closely followed

by De Guise and the men. A reek of blood met them at the entrance to the cave where, in the light of the beggars' tapers, a terrible scene was presented. The dead had been stripped by the beggars and laid in rows. Blood lay in pools upon the floor, which was patterned by the array of arms fallen from dead hands. Two beggars were crazily hopping about, fencing, others crooning over the piles of clothing and collecting the trifles from the pockets in small heaps beside them, and warily keeping their eyes on it. Two were fighting for possession of a watch, pummelling each other unmercifully, the one clutching the watch and the other the chain, and neither willing to let go. De Guise lifted up the sacking while the spy held the lantern and scanned each face. Some were unrecognizable, but he could tell by the stature the dead man was not Pierre.

"Not here," he muttered as he dropped the sacking over the last, and swore beneath his breath. "Hunt him out," he said to the spy, who nodded acquiescence.

Thus they returned and De Guise dismounted in the courtyard and wearily retired to bed. He slept late the next morning and it was not till afternoon he reported to Catherine.

"Find Pierre. He is dangerous," she said.

She was not to be upset by one small failure and proceeded as though the man was accounted for. She was happy at what she had achieved, and smiled at the way she had deceived and thwarted the Baroness.

She felt she herself could relax a little, but intended the Baroness would not, and during succeeding nights and days made certain that Charlotte was busily occupied. Marguerite was not unhappy in isolation,

since she was thus enabled to enjoy in peace the almost nightly visits of Henry de Guise, though in her unhappy frame of mind they often quarrelled ; while Catherine herself anticipated her desire, love, and passed away the hours in blissful anticipation.

Most women crave for love, its tenderness, its comforting affection ; and if they do not find love in its perfection they may come to accept it at its worst, and even to use this phase of it for their own ends or needs, without apparent regret for the lovely thing it might have been.

But every woman who is innately good, no matter how low she falls, keeps in the innermost recesses of her heart a shrine at which she secretly worships—a shrine set up in memory of the perfect love of which she once dreamed.

The cruelty of life brings so many dreams, hopes and aspirations to naught, and one has to be hard to stand a chance of rising above the almost inevitable disillusionment and of survival, in the titanic struggle unceasingly waged for existence. Catherine, having arranged everything without a check, during the negotiations for the marriage greatly impressed the Huguenots with her generous measures, her pretty speeches and convivial airs.

The Count de Clermont was among the Council and, having accepted Catherine's invitation to a *tête-à-tête*, fell beneath her spell, for she could be fascinating when she chose.

She had, naturally, much to discuss with him, and since he was willing to go more than half-way, everything conspired to suit her ambition and personal requirements. One afternoon she invited the Count to accompany her out riding. The two set forth, followed by pages, their fine mounts richly

caparisoned. Catherine's neat feet and ankles showed well in the double stirrup of velvet she had had especially made to her own design and she sat her grey horse a queen indeed.

The breeze blew out her white veil as they cantered down the broad avenues of trees, the sound of the horses' hoofs dulled by the mossy track. They might have been in a world of their own, close to nature—which was at her most prodigal in variety of leaf, colour and the splendour of her liquid falls, white crested over numerous rocky dips : and in the extent of grassy swards—where an undulating vista of green soothed the eye.

Often they bent their heads close together, as they dipped to avoid branches under which their mounts trotted ; then, as if by mutual consent, they paused in a leafy glade. The attendants paused likewise, at a discreet distance ; speculating as the couple were lost to sight, but quite indifferent to the outcome.

The horses walked at will, and drew close together under the screen of foliage. The natural glade was full of shadows and there fell upon the man a feeling that he was in the grip of fate, the inevitable.

Something rose up within him as he looked at the stately woman so close to him. Her face was turned away and her profile drew him like a magnet. He leaned closer, and as she turned towards him and her eyes looked deep into his own, his hand sought and found her own and he pressed it to his lips.

"Do you understand," she murmured, "that the Queen is also the woman, and, too, the little child, crying, yearning, striving."

His eyes filled with compassion, "Majesty, could any man dare to understand,"

"Why not. The Queen sleeps but the woman is awake and crying for her mate, even as the child cries for the toy it is denied. Do you deny water to the thirsty?"

Again the Count pressed her hand to his lips and her fingers clung to his own.

Her eyes were misty with a film of tears, for she sensed the most beautiful emotions of them both rising to a crisis: and even as desire awoke in him she swayed toward him and met his caressing lips. They embraced. She kissed him passionately in her emotional excitement, yet kindly in her happiness, then whispered, "After the ball, to-night." He bowed his acceptance, then they spurred their horses to a canter and, passing the attendants, rode like the wind toward the Louvre, in smiling competition—out-distancing the attendants who, upon their hacks, cut sorry figures in comparison.

That night a brilliant scene was presented at the Louvre, where, amid the nobility of both religions, Catherine had the happiest smile, the Count de Clermont the most apprehensive mind, and the Duc de Guise the most admired figure.

Catherine was gracious, Clermont attentive, and De Guise brimming over with wit and high spirits, and charming the bevy of Court beauties with his intriguing air and accomplished step. For their benefit he surpassed himself in amusing quips and laughed more heartily than was his wont—for he was a serious young man at heart and his joyousness was deliberately feigned so that the pale ghost of his love—his beautiful Marguerite—might be cheered. Her face, so still and pale with youth's uncertainty and dread of events revolving round a hapless head, reflected her unhappiness and indecision, yet she

could do no other than follow the course of the stream that was hurrying her into unknown waters. The face of her lover grew solemn as, for a moment, he reflected upon the happiness with which she would have come to him as a bride. Curse the political morass in which all were caught, he cried in his soul, and with pain in his eyes strode out of the French windows and leaned against the chilly stonework to cool the fever in his blood. In his mind's eye he saw himself stride into the room, pick up the girl he loved in his strong arms and carry her to the waiting chargers. Then for a swift, exhilarating ride under the stars, out-distancing pursuers and arriving safely at his château, set amid stately trees at the edge of a wood.

He smiled as he visualized himself carry her, laughing happily, over the threshold: then closed his eyes as he felt her arms about his neck in a loving embrace. Angrily he shrugged; this could never be.

He turned and through the window watched the procession of dancers, who arrived to entertain the guests. They were to perform a masque and the ladies were attired in striped and spotted dresses of the richest panne and orphin, and the men in every variety of tunic—many grotesquely slashed and turned as though in caricature of the modes.

Some bore on their heads masks resembling winged demons, caryatides and other monstrosities, some frightfully scowling, and others grinning broadly.

In the light of the tapers of yellow wax shining in lustres and candelabra of every size and dimension, the company made strange contrast to the interior decorations of the noble apartment—where huge expanses of tapestry work, marvellously depicting scenes in the life of Jesus, made sombre background,

intersected with marble pillars rising majestically to the domed roof. Here all the satyrs of mythology disported with virgins, the whole streaming with gold which ran along every cornice and gilded the carved wall-panelling. On either side of a splendid gold-framed Venetian mirror at the far end of the room, was a magnificent painting by Nagrénée—the Elder ; one depicting “ Psyche finding love asleep ” and the other, “ Venus and Mars surprised by Vulcan ”: and lined against the walls were the chairs of Cordovan leather, benches of chagrin filigree and velvet stools, brass studded. Here the brilliant company sat and surveyed the masque: while on bahuts, tabulums and *chauffe-doux* attendants placed dishes of sweetmeats for the consumption of both Catholics and Huguenots present.

Suddenly, De Guise started and became alert. That man whose mask had become dislodged in the whirl of intricate movement, where had he seen him ? In a flash his brain provided the answer, Pierre the Huguenot ! With hand on the hilt of his sword he watched every movement and thought he discerned a tendency to swing nearer and nearer to Marguerite—who was sitting quietly next the King and her mother, behind whose chair stood Clermont, upon the raised dais. Henry of Navarre was, at the moment, dancing with Charlotte, and in the mixed company as many Huguenots as Catholics were present. Henry of Navarre had been certainly attentive to her, but had been equally so to the Baroness, Marguerite reflected, and again her eyes strayed to De Guise.

She noted his intent gaze then turned away as, swiftly, his mind worked. Perhaps the first blow was to be struck this night. He lurched into the room, and, cutting diagonally across, bumped heavily

into the man he sought. Instantly he stopped and the others continued uncertainly, as, propelled by the strong arm of De Guise, their companion disappeared in the direction of the garden.

Many a curious glance followed the pair and once outside De Guise roughly directed the man to the avenue of tall trees which dwarfed even his great height. Statues of the transparent marble of Paros arose on either hand: the tinkle of running water as it splashed into the marble basin of the fountain was the natural music of this miniature arcadia, and where a long line of Kings had disported De Guise flung his enemy to the ground.

"Wretch. I ought to run you through. What do you here?"

The man got slyly to his feet, his head-dress remaining upon the ground and in the light of the moon his face looked wolfish. His hand darted to his side, and from his tunic he drew a dagger. In the act of raising it to strike, the rapier of De Guise was in his hand and steel met steel in a swift few passes. Then, conscious of his advantage, De Guise threw down his weapon and poised his bulk to spring. A sneer passed across the Huguenot's face: "I have him," he thought, and leaped in to strike deep.

'Ere it descended, his wrist was caught in an iron grip, the dagger dropped from his grasp and he was at grips with a worthy antagonist. Silently they wrestled, their muscles straining, then the head lock obtained by De Guise snapped the vertebræ and Pierre sank lifeless to the ground.

De Guise stood upright and breathed deeply, inhaling and expelling the air in deep gulps, then he saw his disordered attire and tried to remedy it.

Turning to face the Louvre he saw a white figure

between it and himself and his heart contracted. It was Marguerite, in search of him.

He hastened forward and met her. "Henry," she whispered, placing both hands in his own, "I cannot do it. 'Tis treason to love to wed another—and he a Huguenot."

Henry fought his desire to take her in his arms : he threw up his head though he blinked his eyes to keep back a tear. "Nonsense, beloved. You cannot turn back if you would and see—there lies the proof that you must not."

Following the direction of his pointing finger she saw the body and with a little cry pressed close to her lover. "What is it ?"

"The body of a Huguenot who came here this night with murder in his heart and a dagger in his breast with which to taste the life-blood of your mother, yourself, the King, or all. You must join the two religions and ensure safety. There may be more inside. I must call the guard."

Her pleading eyes scanned his face and he bit his lip to keep tenderness and love out of it.

"Come, let me escort you back," he said coldly. Marguerite stared at him, horrified : then proudly drew herself up.

"No." She backed away, her mournful eyes tear-filled, then turned and ran in by another door. De Guise picked up and replaced his sword, then bowed his head and leaned against the broad trunk of a tree, again cursing the Fate that had prompted his cruelty. Then he strode round to the courtyard and called the sentry.

"Hi, there : where is Captain Maureval ?"

"Here, Sir." The Captain came out of the guard-house and saluted smartly.

"Bring twenty of your men and arrest the mummers." Swiftly he returned the way he had come, while Maureval gave orders: and as he re-entered the room he saw that Marguerite had returned to her place and was whispering a reply to Charles' inquiry as to her absence.

"I felt faint, Sire, but am recovered."

He nodded approval, and she watched the entry of the grand climax to the masque, a small ship, full rigged, with Neptune aboard with his mariners. The ship was on wheels and had sails of white taffety, tackle and cordage silk of red cord and pulleys of gold: and Neptune, attired in green and silver silk, kept time with his trident while his men, in variegated taffety, discharged the cargo of sweetmeats shaped to represent fish, shells and coral.

De Guise carefully watched every movement, and as the dishes were approached to that end of the room where the Royal party sat, the guests by command being served first, he crossed the room and stood behind Marguerite's chair. A scowl darkened his face momentarily as he saw the Count Clermont standing with great assurance behind the Queen Mother, then he recollected the part he had to play and smiled and bowed slightly.

The Count, with a supercilious nod, twirled his moustache, ignorant of the tableau that had been performed in the garden.

It was against his knowledge and desire that Pierre and his intimates were present among the mummers, but Pierre had become suspicious of him when the Musketeers had suddenly terminated the last meeting, from which he and some of his best men had barely escaped by darting into unknown passage-

ways, from which they were lucky to have extricated themselves.

In their flight they had arrived, nearly exhausted but afraid to lie down and sleep, at a very old part of the catacombs.

It was pitch dark, none had a taper and only by holding together did they avoid being separated: and, suddenly turning a corner, they saw an eerie green light and shivered in quicker apprehension. They looked upon a strange scene, indeed: a blind corner that was lit as though with tapers, yet none could be seen. About a score of men and women were there, all in drab cloaks, the women veiled: and as the intruders, to what appeared to be a ceremony, stood still in alarm, the company became aware of their presence and turned toward them.

Ghastly faces they had: death's heads, one and all, with phosphorescent lights in place of eyes: and Pierre's hair stood on end as he realized they looked upon the singular manifestations of spirits of those buried hundreds of years ago, in that corner of the great burial-ground.

A hoarse cry escaped his lips, "Fly": but they were caught in a supernatural grip and their feet were as weighted with lead. Pierre had a sudden inspiration. "Lie down," he yelled, though his voice came feebly, and as they did so over their heads rushed a terrific wind as of innumerable ghosts in flight. Sobbing and groaning they crawled to the first turn, scrambled to their feet and ran.

For two awful days they had wandered about, lost, cursing their plight; then the blessed light of day had appeared shining down a narrow aperture, and with trembling hands two had hoisted a comrade up to the roof. Pulling masses of rubbish down, the

man had finally made exit and found himself on the side of a hill used as a rubbish tip, far from the usual entrance. One by one the grateful survivors crawled out into the open, with many a thankful breath of relief that no soldiers were prowling around, and wandered on until they found someone to direct them. They were in a filthy state, for which they were glad—as less like to be recognized—when at last by devious routes they re-entered Paris: and Pierre, after cleaning himself up and altering his appearance and gait, had reported to an outside agent who had quickly arranged the masque and supplied the mummers.

Pierre had felt angered against Clermont and somewhat jealous, for he had begun to suspect that the attentions of the nobles at Court and of Catherine and the King, had turned the Count's head from the cause he was dedicated to. He had determined to usurp to himself the power for issuing orders and lead the assassination, but death had claimed him.

He had been right in his conjecture that Clermont had changed. Few men can withstand the flattery, cajolery and bribery that enemies will offer to seduce them from their aim, and Clermont was weak and luxury loving. Why should he trouble to assassinate the chiefs of the Catholics if, by a little patience and diplomacy, his end could be more than achieved? Better the friend of a Huguenot wedded to the daughter of a Royal Catholic house, than a fugitive from vengeance if his plans miscarried in attempting what he plainly saw was a risky coup!

The mummers were apprehensive; where was Pierre? Should they proceed as planned or wait? A whisper spread among them: they would strike at the languidly smiling, self-assured Catholics who

watched their energetic portrayal in apathetic amusement.

Hah! How these same faces would change if positions were reversed, or at the sight of the daggers now so cunningly concealed. The man who had taken to himself the place of leader cried in a ringing voice, "Now." At once a score of daggers reflected the lights: but before they could flash in bloody action a stern voice called, "Halt! Let no one move." Fearfully glancing round, the leader saw Maureval in the room, his men filing in behind him. With a snarl he leapt at Catherine, but a ball caught him in the back and with a groan he fell to the floor weltering in blood.

The perfumed company uttered shrieks of dismay, but mostly remained calm and unmoved, Catherine in particular.

The mummers and property were removed: the orchestra, behind a leafy screen, commenced to play, and in a moment the dead man was removed, the floor sanded and the couples whirling in the movement of the dance, while the captive Huguenots were placed in the grim care of Caboche.

As the dancers returned to their chairs, Catherine stifled a pretended yawn and spoke to the King. "My son, I am grievous tired. Pardon my retirement and do not curtail your enjoyment on my account. Good night."

The King bowed and watched her walk away on the arm of the Count. Marguerite, rejoining him, asked, "Where is Mother?"

"Madame has desired to retire—thank God. Come, dance with me." They moved into the throng of dancers and Marguerite's eyes searched for and found the figure of De Guise.

How big and strong he was, she thought ; and bit her lip to keep back jealous thoughts as he bent his dark head to his partner's fair one.

Catherine faintly heard the strains of music from where she stood with Clermont in her dimly lit, luxurious boudoir. Cheek to cheek they tasted of the beautiful human companionship in contact and soon he was passionately embracing her from more than policy. That night saw the culmination of their desires, for Clermont never left her side till morning, and even then Catherine was loath to let him go.

In her new-found happiness of a love that gave bliss as well as received it, she bloomed. Her eyes became brilliant, a faint rose touched her pale cheeks. Her step, from a steady purposeful measure, trod gaily the long stone corridors, and often she gave thanks for the relief but for which her brain must have snapped in the constant turmoil of her surcharged emotions beating upon the fearful rock of her will-power.

By cruel experience she knew that a woman living a normal undisturbed love-life was ignorant of the strain and suffering cast upon those unfortunates who have no husband or lover, and that no woman can say how she would react to circumstances until she was tried. She hugged to her heart the lover-like attentions of the Count, even as she pressed him to her bosom on the too few occasions when they met privately.

Have him killed, pass him out with the other Huguenots ? Nay, as soon would she die herself.

His master, Navarre, impressed by the Count's revelations as to Catherine's goodwill, favoured the match, thus it came about that Catherine's plans achieved success.

On Monday, August 18th, 1572, there was a grand fête at the Louvre, to celebrate the marriage of Marguerite-de-Valois with Henry de Bourbon, King of Navarre. Paris went mad with joy : Catholic and Huguenot rejoiced, and in the relief afforded to both they intermingled as friends and joined hands in dancing through the town.

Cardinal de Bourbon had been appointed to unite the young couple upon a platform erected at the entrance to Notre Dame, and he made a splendid figure in his ceremonial robes. In the magnificence of a cloth of silver robe, with richly jewelled underskirt of satin and Venetian sleeves, with a train fifteen feet long and a corsage glittering with diamonds under a royal blue velvet cloak, heavily embroidered with golden fleurs-de-lis, the bride arrived, by way of a high wooden gallery built from the Episcopal Palace to the platform at the Cathedral.

Three princesses bore the train. A magnificent tiarra of large pearls, diamonds and rubies adorned her head, her beautiful face was neither happy nor sad : she received many envious compliments and told herself that if Henry of Navarre continued to show interest in the Baroness de Sauve she might be allowed some time with her own lover.

A misty veil covered the starry crown upon her beautiful dark hair and Henry of Navarre knew that, but for Charlotte having come into his life, he would have considered himself fortunate with so enchanting a bride. As it was, he determined to follow up a pact already made with Marguerite, the moment they were married, so that even if they could not be lovers they might yet hold hands in the bewilderment aroused by the speculative joining of the two religions.

Charles, Anjou, Alençon, Navarre, Condé and

numerous cousins all wore similar suits as a sign of amity, all heavily embroidered with gold, silver and pearls; and with their uneasiness hidden beneath smiles of various degrees of joyfulness, they looked a carefree gathering of chivalry.

Down a blue carpet lined by soldiers, Marguerite proceeded; and was joined, by the bridegroom's uncle, in Holy Matrimony to Henry of Navarre. A blast upon a silver trumpet announced the happy event and the crowd roared its congratulation.

Then in stately procession the Catholics proceeded into the vastness of the magnificent cathedral, that monument of supremacy in architecture and sculptural decoration.

The glorious stained-glass windows, touched with sunshine, sent rainbow shafts streaming across the pillared floor, like a benediction shed direct from Heaven. Henry of Navarre escorted his bride to the vast, marvellously carved doorway, where—with the attendant Huguenots—he waited while Mass was said. He made an elegant figure and stood out among his eight hundred gentlemen, resplendent in his doublet and trunk hose of yellow and white satin; pantaloons of white and state mantle of black velvet heavily embroidered with gold. His white gloves were encrusted with seed pearls and gold fringed: his black velvet hat sported a white plume, his gold sword-hilt showed glitteringly in contrast to his black sword-belt and sheath.

Marguerite reappeared and he moved forward and took his place beside her. The glorious and solemn words of the ceremony had impressed neither bride nor bridegroom greatly: and afterward, as they drove in gorgeous litters to the Palace, they sat as polite and unaffected as two strangers. Here a



CATHERINE DE MEDICIS

banquet in their honour was laid in the magnificent great hall, where the tables were arranged to form the letter " M " : all groaning beneath the most rare and costly wines and dishes. The room was garlanded with flowers : marble columns represented arched entrances into Arcadia, and the lovely women as they flitted in and out were in competition with the marvellous ceiling paintings of Venus, and all the nymphs of her Court.

All the nobility and beauty of France was present and many a visiting personage beside, and lavishness was prodigal.

The wedding breakfast was attended and enhanced by a masque, wherein a silvered rock was drawn on wheels amid the company. Beautiful young girls—dressed to represent the sixteen provinces—sprang therefrom, and recited verse and danced a ballet that charmed the eye while music charmed the ear.

Henry and Marguerite, estranged centrepieces of the doings of a memorable and notable day, toasted each other and were toasted, while both longed to be at leisure to leave. The King, Queen, the Duc d'Anjou, and the Duc d'Alençon did the honours, Catherine looking blandly upon the scene she very quickly meant to change to one of bloodshed and horror.

Radiantly, she congratulated the Prince Henri de Condé on his recent marriage to Marie-de-Cleves and with the members of her relatives. Guise, looked graciously upon enemies of their house with her tongue in her cheek.

The Duc de Mayenne discoursed with M. de Travanne and Coligny upon the threatened war with Philip II of Spain ; lion and lamb co-mingled and appeared very well pleased.

The King of Navarre, though only nineteen years of age, had a keen eye, the glance of an eagle. He was awake to the tension about him and listened closely to all that was said as he and his bride partook of exquisite viands amid the brilliant company. He could not fail to see that the spirit of unrest was abroad, for the marriage had astonished every one; as also the attitude of King Charles, who had caused a medal of gold to be struck as a souvenir, bearing the words, "I announce to you peace." On the reverse it said: "Discord bound by this bond."

He lived up to his self-bestowed title—"Father of the Huguenots"—so well, and showed such favour to the distinguished Protestant leaders who had arrived in Paris for the great event, that Catholics and Huguenots alike were astounded.

Nor did interested parties fail to hide the great surprise and grave surmise the event occasioned, while wondering whither this uniting of persons and of parties was to lead.

Charles himself was ignorant and totally unaware of the manner in which Catherine had guided this step in her plans to fruition. He was happy because he deemed Marguerite happy: he saw in the giving of "*ma sœur Margot*"—my sister Madge—to Henry of Navarre, the bestowing of his clemency and favour upon all Protestants—making them equally his children with the Catholics.

The necessary formalities, including a special dispensation from Gregory XIII, had taken so long to arrange as to give him anxiety and, now that the event had taken place, his joy overflowed. He embraced the very persons whom a short time before he would have hung from the gibbets as heretics. These were the brave Protestants, to whom the future

now looked rosy. Reassured by the proposed alliance, they had flocked to Paris to witness the event, no doubt congratulating themselves upon the results of their measures for equality.

They included all the leaders—whom Catherine had wished to get into the net and had known nothing short of the marriage would bring anywhere near her, and to these she was particularly charming.

Suspicion was lulled in their breasts: and, while they paid compliments to their enemies during the festivities, Catherine was even then carrying out the fatal plans for their total extermination, with the aid of Henry de Guise. Thus the hours fled upon winged feet while, on the face of it, the noble gathering was united and happy, and only in their hearts did any acknowledge the undercurrent of suspicion and unrest that gnawed, like a rat as it forages.

De Guise, that elegant and gifted rival of the bridegroom, discoursed pleasantly with Teligny, the son-in-law of Coligny, with hate in his heart for the fate of his brilliant father.

He saw again that noble face, clouded by death, as he bent over to hear a dying man's words, accusing Admiral de Coligny as the assassin. Like Hannibal, the young De Guise—hitherto Prince de Joinville—took fierce oath to be avenged upon the Admiral, yet none who saw his haughty and distinguished face on this occasion would have guessed, so superb his dissimulation.

All continued happily while the bride retired, to lay aside her toilet of ceremony. To the ballroom the guests now moved, and here Marguerite, more beautiful in her robe, and with a circle of diamonds about her brow, was presented to the guests by the King. One and all considered her enchanting, and

the foreigners were dazzled by her beauty, and charmed by her witty conversation. They made eulogies to her loveliness, and Charles remarked that in giving Marguerite to Henry he gave her to all the Protestants of the kingdom—which much pleased them and moved to inward sarcasm those who knew the artificiality of Charles.

Princess Claude or Renee, just recovered from an illness, stood with her sister-in-law, Madame de Nevers, and noted Marguerite blush to meet the eye of De Guise. She smiled bitterly as she likewise noted the bridegroom deep in conversation with Madame de Sauve, the Circe who, under the full gaze of her jealous elderly husband, was already under the spell of Henry of Navarre.

Truth to tell, Henry of Navarre was as much swayed by her enchantment. "*Ma mie*," he said, as he noted her downcast look, "believe my happiness is in the hands of only one woman." This in response to her remark that his happiness was now complete.

"And *that* the most beautiful woman in France, your bride."

"Nay, you wrong me with reproach. *Ventre-saint-gris*, do you suppose 'tis I who marry?"

"Indeed, yes, she is lovely enough to be wooed and won by a king for herself alone."

"Have not your lovely eyes seen further—that the reformed religion takes to bride the Pope? I wed because 'tis politic and, mayhap, because you do not love me."

"Nay, you cannot with entire truth say so. Yet had I deeply loved you, Sire, I must die this night: for soon the Queen of Navarre will dismiss her women."

"But supposing I do not escort my wife to her suite but go to my own and retain my gentlemen : or, better still, spend the night with you."

A rosy blush of anticipatory pleasure spread over her cheeks. "Then," murmured Charlotte, "I will say you love only me." Thus all was arranged to their satisfaction, while De Guise looked on and planned similarly.

A sardonic smile flitted across his face as he remembered how Catherine had enabled and prompted the Baroness to seize upon every faculty of Henry of Navarre 'ere he was in fact a husband ; and to such an extent had Henry of Navarre fallen, that at this moment he had no thought for his beautiful spouse, and all for the clever woman who had aroused in his careless, philosophical nature, a passion that had destroyed the pride and timidity which had hitherto controlled him.

De Guise was entirely satisfied that this was so : indeed, so was Marguerite—and greatly relieved : and so in face of the courtiers and guests, Henry of Navarre happily danced with the Baroness de Sauve, much to the disgust of her husband, who was the Secretary of State : while Marguerite showed a preference for Henry de Guise.

Charlotte, playing the part of a siren under the compelling desire of Catherine and her own inclination, finally arranged that Henry of Navarre, whose rooms were immediately under 'her own—by Catherine's arranging—was to be admitted to those overhead upon striking three gentle blows upon the door.

As for Marguerite, before leaving De Guise, she had arranged that he should visit her as usual that night and see for herself what she already knew—

that Henry of Navarre would not be sleeping in her bed that night.

"How can you ensure it?" he asked.

"'Tis the outcome of a conversation held with Henry of Navarre prior to our marriage," said Marguerite, and explained how she had agreed when he had frankly stated that he knew the marriage was a political alliance and that he would never thwart Marguerite's wishes, nor claim what she was unwilling to give.

The gratitude which she felt for him, because this left her free to love where her love lay—was to stand between her husband and death at a time not long distant, for he kept his word, and when the time came Marguerite acted like the Queen of Navarre, rather than a Valois and a daughter of Catherine-de-Medici. However, the evening proceeded to a close.

Eventually, King Charles and the Queen-Mother returned to their respective suites and the vast apartment began to empty, the company deserting the floor and the fine galleries.

The Admiral and the Prince de Conté, brother of Henry of Navarre, were escorted home by four hundred Huguenot gentlemen through a multitude of common people—who swarmed the streets. A strained silence, for the main part, greeted them, in startling contrast to the oration of cheering given to De Guise and his party when they, too, left the Louvre.

The Duchess of Nevers was with him, and after escorting her to their hotel in the Rue de Chaume, he bade her adieu and went to his own apartment. Here he changed.

Under his dress he put on a steel jacket, made of

rings so fine that it was slim as velvet, and no bar to energetic movement. His pourpoint of grey and silver entirely concealed it ; he placed a dagger in his belt, put on a long dark cloak and took up a silver casket. He handed his poignard to his attendant, who thereupon accompanied him to the Louvre.

The streets were now deserted, the dappled sky twinkled with stars and the grand and noble outlines of the buildings stood etched in ink against the sable background. Henry breathed deeply of the swirling night air and reflected upon the strength of man as opposed to nature's grandeur : each, ever and anon, superseding the other. Underneath Marguerite's window, on the first floor and easily accessible save for the thirty-feet deep fosse beneath, he paused. A window grated in the silence.

"Is that you, Gillonne?" he inquired, in an urgent whisper. In reply a cord was lowered, the page produced a rope-ladder—which was tied thereto, drawn up and secured. The Duc de Guise, after buckling his sword, mounted in the shadow of the wall while the page lay upon his cloak, a silent watcher to remain on guard so long as it please his master to remain within.

The night was hot, charged with thunder. No light appeared in all the huge pile of castellated buildings, and the Duke was led in darkness to the antechamber of his mistress along a secret corridor, formed in the wall.

Marguerite came to meet him and together they passed into her candle-lit bedchamber, where proof of her husband's absence was seen in the empty bed.

"Are you content, Harry, that the man I belong to deserts me on the night of marriage?"

"Be sure he would come if you should wish it," said De Guise, handing her the silver casket. Marguerite took it and opened it, revealing a dozen letters, her own passionate epistles addressed to her lover. She set the casket upon her toilet-table and glanced over the letters, her face alternating between smiles and tears as she re-read them.

Looking at him over her shoulder she murmured, "Dearly I would like to preserve these evidences of my youthful idealism, beloved."

Her lover put an arm about her. "'Tis better not to preserve that which may, in enemy hands, provide a lever against us. Be sensible, dear one. Remember, you know not what has become of the tiny model of myself I gave you, nor to what use it may be put to the hurt of either of us, should it be recognized."

"But we could deny all knowledge of it."

"True, in that case, but not where letters addressed and signed are concerned." Marguerite understood.

Instantly she applied them to the flames and watched consume her imprudent words, with both relief and regret struggling for supremacy. Then she smiled at her lover.

Henry put both arms about her and embraced her lovingly. "You are assured your husband will not visit you?"

"Indeed, yes," said Marguerite, but scarce had she said so 'ere Gillonne appeared.

"The King of Navarre approaches."

"Admit him. Quick," cried Marguerite: and pushed De Guise into her closet, softly closing the door upon him. Scarce had she done so than her husband entered, escorted by two pages carrying eight flambeaux of yellow wax in two candelabra.

"Ah, Madame, I rejoice you are not yet in bed,"

he murmured over her hand. Marguerite withdrew her fingers quickly.

"Indeed, Sire, but I was not waiting for you."

"Of course not, since our political agreement ; but with your permission I would talk with you."

Marguerite dismissed the pages and Gillonne : and the King thanked her. "I confess what I wish to say I prefer to say alone," he said, and seated himself beside his wife upon a divan. "We ought, I think, to act as faithful allies."

"Unquestionably, Sire."

"I have many enemies, Madame. The Court is intersected with abysses and I would have your assurance that, as far as you are concerned, our marriage is not a snare." Marguerite sat dumb-founded. *At last she realized her mother's perfidy.*

Henry watched her face, then inquired sharply : "Which side are you on ?"

Marguerite faced him squarely : "Why, Sire, my husband's interests are my own."

"Thank you. I am threatened on all sides, but with your help I might defend myself."

A breath of relief escaped Henry, but Marguerite was increasingly apprehensive, conscious that her lover might hear the conversation through the walls of the cabinet. She rose and moved into the ante-room followed by Navarre, and paused at the door, where they looked at each other inquiringly.

"My enemy ?"

"Never, Sire."

"Friend or lover ?"

"Perhaps."

"My ally."

"Decidedly, Sire." She stretched forth her hand and her husband kissed it, gallantly.

" I breathe more freely. And you ? "

" Yes. The die is cast."

" Then adieu." Again he bent over her hand. " Good night, and happy dreams," he said, and a voice interrupted.

" Not so fast, Sir," said De Guise, standing in the doorway, hand on hilt.

Henry of Navarre placed his hand to his own sword ready and alert for the first attempt to draw : but Marguerite thrust herself between them.

" Enough, my cousin. Do you kindly allow my husband to pass."

De Guise ground his teeth. So Marguerite was protecting the wily Huguenot, merely because she had wed him !

If she truly loved himself, how could Navarre's fate matter to her ?

Women were annoying creatures. He must teach her a sharp lesson.

He stood back with folded arms, Marguerite relaxed and Navarre bowed and left, and swiftly returned to his own apartments. His sharpened mind turned over the vital facts of the conversation, then—satisfied—he dismissed the pages and at once ascended the staircase to Madame Sauve's.

Meanwhile, De Guise walked the floor of Marguerite's room, grave of face. " You did not behave as my mistress, Marguerite," he said, slowly and sarcastically. " You should have led him nearer the cabinet and let him talk, or kept watch at the door while I slew him."

Marguerite was stung to anger. " Sir, I may not love my husband, but why should I betray him ? He is weak, you are strong."

" Why did you admit him ? "

"So that he might not suspect I was so engaged as to be unable to. I would keep from him any knowledge of our liaison, protect both myself and you, and further, I saved your life, for he would kill you if he could."

"Then, Madame, I will save your life," said her lover, turning to leave.

Marguerite, "What, you would desert me?"

De Guise murmured, "Should your husband return——" His attitude angered the fair Marguerite.

"But he will not," she insisted.

"Should he return he may, as you say, kill me. Or I him; or again, he may kill you. I will go before so painful a necessity arises."

In his heart he wanted to humble Marguerite, make her beg him to stay, plead for his love—which he knew she needed, and badly; but he did not reckon with her ready wit—which enabled her to see his aim. She yearned to swoon in his arms, longed for the ease from surcharged emotions physical contact would bestow, yet a bitter resentment against his tactics gave her the momentary strength to resist her conscious desires.

Her lip curled in scorn, she uttered no word and, glancing round, De Guise met her steady glance, and himself quailed. Therefore he left the room and returned to the window overlooking the fosse, believing she would not, could not, let him go.

A terrible struggle took place in Marguerite's breast, between desire and anger: she saw him go with pain, but made no move to detain him: for she felt he was inserting the thin edge of the wedge of power over her. She called Gillonne to aid her undress and retired to bed, deserted by both her

lover and husband ; and felt that in the inward struggle in which her love for Henry de Guise warred with her jealous care of personal freedom from the haphazard shackles of a man, love had died, pitifully. Shadows, like smudges of violet ink, enhanced the beauty of her eyes as she lay and a tear trickled down her cheek.

De Guise, after kicking his heels for an hour and more, conquered his desire to return and made his way down to the ground. He tugged viciously at the ladder and in a few moments the cord snapped and it fell about him. Dismissing his page with the ladder, he made his way to a notorious house, where he was heartily welcomed.

He did not intend to give way to his dissatisfaction, but he knew he would find here many of his friends and, sure enough, he was hailed the moment he entered. Nobles of every age were engaged with actresses from the opera in performing an original play, wherein clothes were discarded for sprays of flowers, and all the tumult of sheer abandonment was rife.

Screams of laughter rang out : wine generously supplied made hotter heads already hot, as nobles and ladies disported themselves : and in a kind of desperation De Guise sat down with three others and drank deep of the golden wine.

Beautiful women leaned playfully over him and 'ere he knew it he had seized one and kissed her heartily. Finding the process very much to his liking, he continued and soon, the necessary climax being arrived at, the couples dispersed to dimly lit rooms and lost all sense of time in the oblivion of love's counterpart.

In the early hours a solitary horseman was to be

seen, speeding across the verdant mantle of the country-side, riding out to meet the dawn to cleanse himself by the swift passage through the morning air of the memory of his deflection. His face was sad, but his head was easy as he reflected that unhappiness is the surest cause of a fall from virtue and repression the spur.

How complex was each specimen of humanity : loving the sweet and lovely emotions that reflect our highest aspirations, yet craving, on occasion, the purely physical which at other times disgusted. Once the first difficult unmoral step is accomplished—whether one is pushed, falls or takes it willingly, it is increasingly difficult not to go on, and Henry knew that since his quarrel with his beloved and because of it, he was a man who would plumb the depths of amorous intrigue—having taken that step. Now, more than ever, he must renounce Marguerite.

Though the act was the same, the emotions therefrom were very different, the one as high as the other was low, for he loved Marguerite with his soul more than physically.

He reached a high promontory, where was a huge rock that seemed poised between heaven and earth, and dismounting, he knelt and prayed, long and earnestly.

His horse wandered about cropping the dewy grass as he knelt, and the sun came out in all its glory and shed a halo about his bowed head.

CHAPTER VIII

INTERLUDE

THERE followed a succession of balls, tournaments and banquets. The Huguenots, forgetting the simplicity of their true leaders, Luther, Calvin and Knox, strutted about in silken pourpoints, their large numbers frightening the Catholics ; and the week was one of feverish anxiety for Catherine, who saw the desire for power and importance apparent in their gait.

On August 22nd the Admiral was watching Charles and De Guise play tennis. As he strode away to go home, tired and forgetful of danger, from a shuttered window there came the long-waiting ball of a harquebus—which smashed the Admiral's right forefinger and travelled up the wrist to the elbow. The Admiral fell to the ground. The shot startled the King, who rushed up to Coligny, exclaiming : " Can I have no peace," a rebuke to the trouble the Admiral's presence always occasioned him.

The glance of the Admiral's eye, as he looked scornfully up at De Guise, ignoring the King, was accusing ; but De Guise was innocent. The culprit was Maureval, the ambush Catherine's, for although at one time she had maintained friendly relations with her cousin, she now saw in him the medium through which her enemies were working—to her destruction. Her masculine quality of mind unerringly

guided her to safeguarding moves and reprisals, and in her mind all that she contemplated was completely sanctioned by the grim necessity of maintaining the Crown and the Church as she had striven to uphold it.

Not easily would she submit to the downfall of the Roman Apostolic Authority and the break-up of her own domain—both the objects of the Huguenots. Cunning should be met with cunning, plot with counterplot !

Everything was now in train ; the Huguenots were entirely off their guard, were within the net. Catherine had fully instructed Maureval—who was superintending by night the sharpening of knives, broadswords and weapons of every description.

The Duke de Guise was arranging the rendezvous with the leaders of the companies, bands of armed men were to be stationed in certain houses, bearing a white cross, in every district ; so that the Catholics, who were to wear a white cloth cross upon their hats to distinguish them from the Huguenots, should know which houses contained enemies and which did not. Catherine had fixed the time for midnight, August 24th, but prior to the massacre she had to get the King to give the fatal order. On the night of August 22nd, Catherine sent for Marguerite.

By this time Marguerite would be thoroughly disgusted with Henry of Navarre, she reflected, for not one night had he spent with her. Catherine had seen that he had not : so when Marguerite arrived she took her arm affectionately as though in sympathy.

“ My child, how my heart bleeds for you. Your suffering must be intense.”

“ How, Madame ? ”

“ Why, I have discovered where your husband

spends his nights and am about to wipe out the dishonour, rebuke the slur cast upon a Valois."

"Indeed, and where should he spend them if not with his wife—with me," said Marguerite, assuming an air of proprietorship she was far from feeling.

"With you?" queried Catherine, blankly.

"But yes, Madame, where else?" Catherine felt she could take Marguerite and shake her, but could not let her know that she herself had made certain Henry spent his nights elsewhere; so she pretended a vast relief and dismissed her daughter. Alone once more, she sat and debated in her mind the strange ways of women in general and of her daughter in particular.

She had thought Marguerite would readily fall in with her plans against Henry of Navarre, but had found her totally unwilling to admit the necessity for plans—and this loving another man.

Catherine knew women at their worst, knew the pretty deceptions, gross indulgences, hateful vanities and pretences rife among the women she used without a scruple: knew that some women and young girls are so lost to decency and to higher aspirations as to be ready instruments for any degrading practice. Knew, also, the so-called good ones, who were good merely because their natures were negative, dull and bovine—but never before had she met a woman with Marguerite's nature, full of emotion but keeping a firm hold upon herself, at once ardently giving and reserved, forgiving, innately good, but without sham or shame; straightforward, loyal and strong.

Marguerite returned to her room in puzzled thought but, unable to fathom her mother's mind, dismissed the matter. She was preparing for bed when the Baroness de Sauve burst in.

"Your Majesty," cried Charlotte, "where is the King?"

"Why, you know perfectly well he is never to be found here," said Marguerite in surprise.

"Would to heaven he *were* here. Listen, they are going to murder the Huguenots and the Queen Mother has sworn the death of Henry of Navarre." Marguerite started to her feet in horror, as Charlotte flung herself upon her knees before her.

"Oh, Madame, forgive me. I am guilty towards you—but by the command of Catherine. Find Henry and keep him with you for he is in danger and I could not aid him with my life."

"You cannot be in earnest."

"Indeed I am, Madame. La Dariole has it from Francis that to-morrow night sees the end of all Huguenots."

Marguerite thought she understood: could see that Catherine had intended to use her knowledge of her husband's absences to alienate her from him, to tempt her to fail him in his need for her protection after having used her own daughter to snare him. She did not yet know Catherine had hoped entirely to ensure her neglect, nor did Catherine know of Marguerite's pact with Henry. Followed by Charlotte, Marguerite hurried out, her thoughts in wild confusion, her emotions rioting.

Everywhere were signs of activity. Gentlemen bearing orders and dispatches were going to and coming from her mother's apartments, and Catherine was much occupied opening letters and giving orders, surrounded by armed guards.

Fear seized Marguerite and she fled down the corridor towards the King's room. Charles would stand by her—surely, no matter to what lengths he might

be persuaded by his mother ; and well she meant to test her brother in her new-found regard for her husband's person and position.

King Charles had invited Henry of Navarre and the Duc de Guise to dine with him, that night.

" You have a large and growing force of gentlemen," he remarked to his new son-in-law.

" I am collecting about me all who may be of service to you, Sire."

" But let them be brave," quoth Charles: " and I welcome one and all. And do you expect any more ? "

" Why, Sire, only one whom Coligny recommends, Count de la Mole, a provincial."

" I," broke in De Guise, " recruit likewise, for brave Catholics. I, too, Sire, collect those who may be of service to Your Majesty, as I would be."

The entrance of the Admiral de Coligny, who was permitted to enter unannounced, continued the dangerous conversation between the leaders of the opposing factions and the one upon whom their strength was to be tried.

" Ah, my father," cried Charles, " we were speaking of reinforcements. Have you any ? "

The Admiral smiled depreciatingly, thinking how well he fooled the King.

" Only M. de la Mole, who was at Orleans yesterday and will be in Paris to-morrow."

" Ha, you must be a wizard to know what to-morrow is going to see. You, my good cousin of Guise, tell me, does not your recruit from Piedpont arrive likewise to-morrow ? "

" Indeed, he does, Sire."

Charles murmured, " I would I could be as certain of happenings not so far distant. Since no one can

say what to-morrow will bring here—how can one be assured of events so far away.”

He sighed heavily, and with a cunning look veiled with thought he put his arm about the shoulders of Coligny, then turned to the others. “Leave us, gentlemen.”

Thus dismissed, Henry of Navarre and Henry de Guise withdrew: and scarce had they bowed formally in parting at the outer door when Marguerite appeared. Her beautiful face was strained in the sickly light that yet must reveal her startling loveliness: and as she composed herself to hide her uneasiness, both men gazed upon her fair face and form and responded to the magic of her sex.

Both towered over her, protectingly: and unconsciously she had to choose, while herself responding to the presence of the man she knew as lover and he whom she had yet to know intimately.

She laid a hand on the arm of her husband, ignoring her lover, who disappeared, fuming, down the corridor.

Marguerite drew her husband to her own apartment, glad to know he was on good terms with Charles: fearful of what she might say, but determined to protect him.

Meanwhile, Coligny was uneasy. Charles was too affable. He insisted that as King he meant to protect the Huguenots, swore he trusted only his new friends and that only the Admiral could be called brave as Cæsar, wise as Plato. He spoke of a plan of campaign being drawn up with relation to Philip, to reassure Coligny on any activity he might have noted and distrusted; and, in saying adieu, kissed Coligny upon the forehead, the action of a Judas who believed he could be a Christ.

Alas for human endeavour.

He watched the aged form retreat down the corridor, then entered his armoury, his favourite apartment: where he took fencing lessons with Pompeé, and poetry with Ronsard; the latter sick at heart over the imprisonment in England of the lovely and most gracious lady of his dreams, Mary Stuart, tragic prisoner in the hands of Elizabeth.

The Queen of Scots* had delighted in many poems and elegies from the pen of her friend of a happy childhood spent in France, Ronsard, who dreamed of a Venus immured within the great grim walls of Fotheringay—of bloody memory to all Stuarts—while submitting to hear and criticize the inane attempts at poetry of her inactive brother-in-law, Charles, who now in vicious temper strode the room, scowling at unbidden thoughts. Two sides of the room were hung with costly weapons of offence and defence, shields, axes, spears, pistols, halberds and muskets; including a splendid arquebus with a verse written on a silver plate on the barrel:

"Pout maintenir la foy,
Je suis Belle et fidele,
d'v eunemis du Roi
Je suis belle et Cruelle."

This was the gift of Ronsard, who believed Charles might become expert with the firearm, but never a poet.

On the third wall, a marvellous piece of tapestry presented a blank front, but the King lifted a corner of this and disclosed a secret passage, carpeted with thick pile, leading to a private chamber, likewise curtained.

* For the full life-story of Mary Stuart see Miss Meade's "Mary Stuart, Queen and Woman."

This communicated, by secret narrow corridors built into the thickness of the walls, with the courtyard.

No two persons could pass in opposite directions, and many a door with a complicated lock stood between the outside world and the King, who made use of this when visiting Marie. He now paced up and down in secret turmoil.

Meanwhile, Henry of Navarre and Marguerite talked, the King noticing the feverishness of his wife, as she took his arm and led him away, close to her side.

On reaching her apartment he strolled to the window. To-morrow, he thought, La Mole would enter Paris by the gate of Saint Marcel : and then for the secret information appertaining to his own agents and the enemy !

" There seems lightning in the air," he remarked, thoughtfully.

Marguerite trembled. What could she say ? Uncertain as to whether her suspicions were correct, and afraid of the trouble she might evoke if she voiced them, she was in a dilemma. " You have enemies, Sire."

" Ha, I know it."

" I would advise you to go armed and keep within the Louvre, near to Charles."

Henry bowed, after a searching glance which told him time was a factor. " I thank you ; now, if you will excuse me," he bowed again and Marguerite let him go. She moved with him to the door, where they stood a moment charged with conflicting thoughts ; both desiring to be alone, particularly Henry. He was, he reflected on closing the outer door of his suite behind him, almost the only

Huguenot within the Louvre, the others being lodged in the town.

Such isolation troubled him now. How easy it would be for him to be dispatched, murdered in his sleep or thrown down one of the many *oubliettes* that lurked beneath the stone flags of the corridors. Ghosts rose up before his troubled gaze and he saw Death, pointing a bony finger at him.

Striding about his apartments, he pondered the possibility of leaving Paris on the morrow and eventually took his way to Charlotte. Perhaps she would advise him.

He found her looking charming in a flowing *négligée*, and when La Dariole, who admitted him, had retired from the room, carefully closing the door, the Baroness flung herself into his arms.

"Thank God you have come," she cried. "Listen. To-morrow they are murdering the Huguenots."

Henry: "How do you know and who says so?"

Baroness: "Don't ask stupid questions. 'Tis true, would to God it were not."

Henry: "I feel in my bones it is true: the King has been too charming to us Huguenots to be sincere. Marguerite was but the bait to lure us into the hands of that she-devil—Catherine."

The Baroness wrung her hands, then clung to him, weeping.

"Marguerite is innocent, I swear. She begged me to warn you, since she herself lacks for the words that would make you alert without herself sacrificing the Valois pride."

Henry: "Pride! Forsooth 'tis an ill-used word. Catherine prides herself on diplomacy, Charles, on his fencing. I on my chivalry! Ha."

He strode up and down the room with a bitter

laugh. "And you pride yourself upon the conquest of men. Truly, there are as many facets to pride as to a well-cut diamond."

Baroness: "Do not upbraid me, Henry. Life takes and moulds all of us, so that in after years we scarce recognize ourselves as we were. I was once pure and sweet, an easy mark for pillaging mankind. You are too young as yet to know the evil brotherhood of men who prey upon each other's sisters and wives, and think it naught. Mayhap 'tis the nature of the brute."

Henry: "You look ravishing, my dear, and who cares for a pure woman? Not I. Come, love me." They embraced and passed into the bedroom.

CHAPTER IX

CATHERINE STRIKES

THE morning of August 23rd dawned bright and sunny, and the Court went hawking by arrangement. At the early hour of 6 a.m., the King descended to the courtyard, already crowded by richly caparisoned horses and hundreds of men and women—splendidly clothed. The huntsmen held hoodwinked hawks upon their fists and prickers had horns ready—lest the King decided to course the stag or roebuck also.

The salutations pleased Charles, he breathed joyously the crisp morning air, and his sadness disappeared as he glanced over the brilliant company and saw with pleasure that Marguerite was close by the side of her husband.

Catherine had been wrong in telling him they were estranged, evidently, he thought : and his emotions took a turn in favour of Navarre.

Had he but known it, this seeming close bond was the result of Charlotte's advice. Believing Charles would not bereave his sister of her happiness, she had advised Henry to play the happy husband under the beneficent gaze of the King : to appear greatly in love and very happily mated, and well he played his part. The gilded, luxurious company moved out of the Louvre and darted like a multi-coloured avalanche toward St. Germain, the King at the head,

with Henry of Navarre and Marguerite close behind, amid the plaudits of the people.

Catherine, from a window, watched them out of sight. She had noticed the pallor of Henry and his nearness to Marguerite and decided to counteract the pleasant impression on Charles somehow, while debating in her mind as to how she could secure the demise of the man who evoked it.

"I think," she muttered, "I can secure this dear Henriot. He is, after all, but flesh and blood. We shall see." Swiftly she made her way to his apartments and opened the door with her double key, carrying a flat parcel. This she carefully undid and disclosed the treatise on hawking that belonged to De Guise, which she had taken from his room two days previously. From her manner of handling it, some danger attached; and, indeed, it had been very carefully brushed with liquid arsenic, whereby some of the pages stuck together.

With a smile of satisfaction she placed it upon the table and withdrew.

Even if Charles spared his life, Catherine would claim it. The day passed. Much was accomplished during the absence of the King and everything in readiness by the time the *cortège* returned, all dusty and tired with the sport.

Meanwhile, La Mole, having arrived and inquired for Henry of Navarre during his absence, took himself to an hotel, "La Belle," near by. He wore a black velvet doublet ornamented with gold, a red cloak, long black boots and black hat, under which his face showed pale and delicately featured.

Twenty-four years of age, he was slimly built, had blue eyes, a beautiful mouth and small moustache, white teeth and pleasant smile. He wore an amulet

covered with Egyptian characters and was a young patriot of Navarre. Another traveller rode up and dismounted simultaneously—a tall, heavy, red-haired cavalier, with a fierce eye and long moustache. He was a paid spy of Spain.

Both looked at the sign and awaited the appearance of the host : each full of life and pride and destined for the suite of the Duc d'Alençon.

"Mordi, Monsieur, our choice is similar," said the red-haired one, his ugly face taking on pleasanter lines as he smiled, showing strong white teeth.

"A tempting house and so near to the Louvre. Giordano is the host, I see. We *may* fare well, but Paris is full of disappointments," said La Mole, smiling in a friendly manner.

"Ha, I warrant I get a well-roasted chicken if I have to roast the host. Let us enter. Your humble servant Count Annibal de Coconnas," quoth the big man, as he bowed. "I, Monsieur, am the Count Joseph Boniface de Lerac de La Mole, at your service."

The two dismounted as an ostler appeared, threw the bridles and adjusted their weapons, both being armed with sword and dagger of steel.

Now appeared the host, talking to Maureval, who had been explaining to his friend certain duties about to be undertaken.

"Well, gentlemen?" said Giordano, looking inquiringly at the two.

"We wish to sup and sleep here to-night."

"Gentlemen, I have only one room and would prefer not to lodge you. You have, I see, no servants. However"—as the two appeared to draw their swords—"come inside. It is easy to see you are from the country, for only great men are killed

nowadays, and no gentleman would trouble to spit an *hôtelier*."

"Mordi," said Coconnas. "He laughs at us."

"Patience! Paris is full owing to the King of Navarre's marriage."

"And mighty insolent the Huguenots are," growled the host. La Mole frowned.

"Supper quickly," cried Coconnas, and the host retired.

"Paris is not a gay city. 'Tis forbidding and heavy," said La Mole.

"Aye, and I must go out in it and search till I find the Duc de Guise," said Coconnas, then noted that the host had returned and was looking queerly at him and that his attitude had changed to servility. His quick wit revolved round the possibility that here was a fellow-conspirator, and he smiled.

"I see the name is magical. The great Henry is doubtless the idol of Paris, as he is the mirror of chivalry."

"Which Henry?" said La Mole.

"De Guise, of course."

"I beg to differ. I am directed by Henry of Navarre."

The host's eyes narrowed. Turning to Coconnas, he said, "Monsieur is lucky and has come, doubtless, for the *fête*."

"Ha, *fête*," cried Coconnas. "Well, I am a good Catholic."

Giordano turned to La Mole.

"So you are a Huguenot. Do you know your Admiral had his arm broken after playing tennis with the Duc de Guise, the King and Teligny: and lost a finger by a poisoned ball?"

"What?" said La Mole sorrowfully, yet in anger.

"Really," said Coconnas joyfully and amusedly.

La Mole flushed. Forgetful of supper he rose and, not to be outdone, Coconnas rose likewise. La Mole, looking surly, spoke. "I shall probably dine with Henry of Navarre."

"And I with Henry de Guise."

They both made their way to the Louvre and, at the wicket, the German captain—Besme—received Coconnas from the hands of the sentry, took his communication and bade him follow.

La Mole was less fortunate; he was kept standing at the gate, the name of Navarre evidently lacking the power of that of De Guise.

Suddenly a company of one hundred cavaliers came out. The young De Mouy, at the head, was attired in black, in respect to his late-lamented father; but his well-known cloak of red velvet blew gaily in the breeze from the saddle.

There was nothing about the cavalcade to denote that they were Huguenots, for of late their garb had become as bright-hued as that of the Catholic gentlemen: and vastly misleading, thereby, since a Huguenot was supposed to be a Puritan and easily distinguished by the severity and sombreness of his attire.

"Ha," said the sentinel to his comrade, "here come De Mouy and his gaudy Huguenots."

At the words, La Mole darted forward and approached the leader. "Monsieur de Mouy?"

"Yes, Sir. Whom have I have honour of addressing? I do not recollect having had the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"The Count Lerac de La Mole, with a letter for Henry of Navarre from the Governor of Provence." De Mouy dismounted, saluted cordially, and led

La Mole into the château, leaving him in the corridor near the entrance to Navarre's apartments.

La Mole advanced, turned the corner leading to the ante-room as bidden, and suddenly met Marguerite, entering her own room further down the corridor.

Both stopped. In the light of the torches carried by the Queen's pages, both were touched with misty beauty, the meeting with romance. For a few moments they eyed each other, appraisingly : bereft of words until Marguerite murmured :

"What is your wish, Sir ?"

"Pardon me, Madame, I wish to see the King of Navarre."

"The King of Navarre is with his brother-in-law, the King of France."

"Ah, then perhaps if I gained the Queen's audience . . ."

"You have it. Speak, and quickly."

La Mole bowed low, opened his doublet and took therefrom a letter, silk-wrapped, which he handed over, saying : "If you will be so good, Majesty."

Marguerite nodded, smiled and murmured :

"Now, Sir, one of my pages will escort you to the waiting-room if you care to stay awhile."

She moved away, and La Mole's eyes followed her with adoring and reverent glance.

The Queen's beauty had moved him strangely. She appeared distraught, and in one so young it roused La Mole to reverent pity. Ah, how he would like to serve his Queen. Nobly, humbly. To die for her would be bliss !

There now appeared on his way out the swaggering Coconnas ; who, having been prepared by Captain Besme for the events of the night and given the password "Guise," did not trouble to salute the

Huguenot as he went past the door that La Mole had just entered.

La Mole at this moment was informed by a page that Henry of Navarre could not receive him, but would do so on the morrow. The countersign, "Navarre," would ensure entry. He thereupon made his way past the numerous guards and sentries and returned to the Hotel, where he found Coconnas seated before a hearty meal.

Looking up with a shrewd glance, Coconnas exclaimed: "So! I have not dined with the Duc de Guise: nor have you, I warrant, with Henry of Navarre. Sit down."

Together they supped—ignorant of the ties that were to bind them for ever together.

Within the Louvre, Henry de Guise spoke with Catherine.

"All goes ill. The King is more than ever fascinated by the Huguenots. He ignores all that I can say to enlighten him as to the Huguenots' plots, and feeds and pets his dogs if I attempt to discourse upon their bravadoes," she said.

"Is the King alone now?"

"I believe so." Catherine reflected. She had to persuade Charles the massacre was necessary and convince him that Henry of Navarre was unfaithful to Marguerite and deserving of no consideration—so that he, too, might be included in the massacre. She knew she faced a big task, for the King was happy with the Huguenots about him and becoming more and more convinced that they meant him no harm.

Catherine feared to delay matters lest the King should get entirely out of hand—which had prompted her in fixing a date so soon after the marriage. She



11

CHARLES IV AND CATHERINE DE MEDICIS



HENRY OF NAVARRÉ

went along to the King's room, after desiring the Duc de Guise to follow shortly after her.

Here she found Charles IX caressing his favourite greyhounds, who lay on velvet cushions on the Turkey carpet. On perches along the wall were three falcons and a pied hawk—used for bringing down small birds in the precincts of the Louvre.

On returning from the hawking party, Charles had accompanied Henry to his apartments : and, noticing the book on the subject on the table, idly turned over the pages. His attention was immediately seized by the beautiful and lifelike illustrations. " Why, Harry, this is marvellous."

" Sire, I never saw it before."

" Come, lend it to me."

" Willingly."

Greatly pleased, the King took it away and it now lay upon a shelf within his room till he had leisure to study it.

So cleverly had Catherine arranged her countenance into a semblance of tearful agony, that Charles started. " Why, Madame, what ails you ? " he inquired.

" My son," Catherine replied in a shaking voice, ' I desire your leave to retire to one of your châteaux far from Paris. The farther the better, though my heart fails me at the prospect."

Charles, much as he suspected Catherine of eternal duplicity, felt that something serious must have happened to induce her to wish to remove herself from the city. He inquired her reason.

" Because I will not stay here and see the son of Antoine de Bourbon substituted for the son of Henry II. Every day I receive fresh insults from persons not of our faith, every day the swaggering

Huguenots offend and assault the inoffensive Catholics, every day you are threatened by those towards whom you have shown every kindness and tolerance."

"But consider, Madame, that their brave M. de Mouy, the elder, has been assassinated. Have they no reason for threats? And, *Ventre-Saint-Gris*, I vow Henry would make a better King." Charles was testing his mother. Had she come merely upon a pretext, he felt she would soon tire of his retaliations and leave him in blustering anger. As it was, Catherine was ready to stand her ground: she had to, if she was not to fail at the last fence. She continued fearful and anxious.

"My son, have it your own way. But I shall not stay to see them have vengeance upon M. de Guise, and upon you and upon the true upholders of the faith."

"Come, Madame, are you not acting hastily and exaggerating the position?"

"I know only too well I am not. If you care to wait and be butchered it is more than I shall. Furthermore, when their head and chief, Henry of Navarre, openly flouts his bride in favour of another woman—" she paused.

"Do you dare to repeat they are estranged when I myself have seen them on good terms," demanded Charles.

"I know for a fact that Henry has never occupied Marguerite's bed. The poor child is too proud to appear other than happy."

Charles felt rage flood him at the slight and stood wavering between his anger and his desire not to fall in with his mother's wishes: actuated, as he well knew, by reason of her own. Catherine made a

curtsey and retired towards the door. Here Charles, with his fatal indecision, stopped her, ready to be convinced, even against his own better judgment and desire.

“ You really believe the position is so serious.”

“ Indeed it is, the Huguenots have been wounded, and, if you fail to dispatch them, they will turn like a wounded boar and tear you down ; tear down, also, the monuments we have laboured to build up to your memory.”

“ But how search out those who are dangerous. Among so many, how can we distinguish,—and they are, after all, my subjects and entitled to some justice.”

“ But,” whispered Catherine, “ if you could be rid of them all, how free you would be from danger, how secure : and if I say to you that this were well within the scope of your power, what then ? More, that it were possible, and that you could be freed by the special interposition of Saint Bartholomew. . . ? ”

Charles burst out laughing to cover the thrill which passed through him : a thrill which pleased the selfish and cruel side of his nature and which horrified that which was noble and just. He closed his eyes and leaned against the beautifully carved table, thinking. The Huguenots were certainly behaving as equals to himself and perhaps their cordiality hid scheming minds. Once they felt secure on the footing they had achieved, would they turn and stab him in the back and serve the Catholics as cruelly as he could serve them ?

Catherine knew he was transfixed, seeing inward pictures of dread cruelty which he could practise, fancied debts which he could pay. As they stood thus, Henry de Guise arrived.

"Ha! Cousin," said Charles, "you arrive in opportune time. What do you say to this matter of the Huguenots? Are they so dangerous and two-faced as Madame here insists? Would they kill me?"

"Yes."

"Am I not King?"

"No, Sire, not yet, but you can be, to-morrow, if you say the word that enables us to preserve thee and rid France of the enemy."

"To-morrow, to-morrow." Charles connected this statement with the one already made by Catherine. "You mean that to-morrow there shall be no other King to dispute with me. Well, I do not say that were it possible from a distance—but here, in the Louvre—under my eyes."

He made a grimace of distaste which hid his secret horror and at that moment Catherine retired from the room, whispering to De Guise as she passed him: "Be firm." Knowing her son so thoroughly Catherine felt that the order was as good as given and proceeded to give her instructions 'ere returning to add her final persuasions to those of De Guise.

She found Charles pacing the floor in an agony of indecision—a prey to conflicting thoughts, harried by the councils that De Guise, ever and anon, whispered into his ear. In honeyed tones she told him that Coligny blamed him for his attempted assassination, knowing full well that Coligny would certainly demand somebody's head for it.

She knew she must act quickly if she was to take advantage of the position. Italian and German mercenaries had been engaged by De Guise, the mob of Paris was in mood to be loosed at the encroaching Huguenots: so she insinuatingly aroused a lust in

Charles. "Say the word and the rivers will flow red as wine."

Blood! The words wove themselves in letters of flame before the inward vision of the King: the cruel side of his nature strained at the leash of decency like a hound that sights its prey, and a red mist blurred his vision as fiendish emotions warred with the good. He licked his dry lips: blood, of his enemies. Better theirs be shed than his own.

Again the whisper "Kill or be killed." Then Catherine said, scornfully, "Now we know you for what you are, a traitor. 'Tis fear of the Huguenots holds you from signing this order!"

"Par la mort Dieu, cease woman. Can you promise me this—that not one Huguenot will be left alive to reproach me?"

"Ah, spoken like my son. Our aim is just that. Now sign." She pushed the paper close to his nerveless hand, but still he hesitated. "Sign," hissed his mother, urgently. Flesh and blood, particularly that of Charles, could only stand so much; the strain was driving him mad, his head longed for the peace that an acquiescence would give: so with a quick gesture he placed his signature upon the fatal paper.

Catherine triumphantly whisked away the death warrant of thousands and returned to her apartment, joyfully. Hastily she dismissed one of the guard to the Hotel of the Count Clermont, giving him an order for the safe keeping of her lover. He, of all Huguenots, would be spared, to her delight and his own, by the protecting guard outside his room. Clermont was not to be personally warned, lest he take afright and warn those whose blood Catherine

meant to let : he was, in a sense, to be imprisoned and kept safe behind the bars.

This accomplished she bethought herself of another duty, not so fond and pleasing. She dismissed all her women save Marguerite and was about to speak to her when Henry of Navarre appeared.

" Well, my son ? "

" I seek De Conde and D'Alençon. We were to go into the city."

" Ah ! Yes ? " she queried, as Charlotte de Sauve appeared.

" Madame, Your Majesty sent for Rene. He is here."

A flush swept over the face of Henry as Rene entered. This slayer of his mother produced a box for Catherine's private inspection. It contained a poisoned paste with which Catherine intended to prove to Marguerite and to Charles that Henry nightly slept with Charlotte : and she took care none saw it as she put it in her pocket. Her cruel glance went from Charlotte to Henry : Rene at once realized that Catherine meant harm to them both. He knew her so well.

The paste would be put where Charlotte would use it upon her lips and in turn transmit it to Henry.

On the mouths of both, deep sores, uncurable, would appear ; while Marguerite, untouched, would be a living proof of Henry's unfaithfulness.

Rene, however, had his own ideas and meant to carry them out. Catherine detained him. She required further evidence from Rene, who had cast Henry's horoscope at her command.

" You may go, my son ; and you too, Marguerite," said Catherine to Henry and Marguerite and the two said good night, and left.

In the corridor Marguerite paused to give to Henry the letter of La Mole. Madame de Lorraine now approached, in great agitation, to enter her mother's rooms.

"Don't go out,, Henry. The King desires to see you in the Armoury," she whispered and hither the two proceeded, conscious of the tread of soldiery ; who, in the apartments of the Louvre and the courtyard, numbered three thousand. They reached the gallery near the apartments of Charles and sat waiting. Henry was unarmed and mistrustful, Marguerite distressed.

Henry took her hands in his own.

"I knew when I came here that I was threatened by the Duc d'Alençon and the Duc d'Anjou—your brothers ; by the Duc de Guise, Cardinal de Lorraine and the Queen-Mother—by every one, in fact, but you. I ask you, Madame, to befriend me ; with your help I shall defend myself, for you are beloved of all who hate me."

"I will be your ally, Sire. Never your enemy." Henry saw that her eyes were tender with concern for him, and noted what a superb creature she was, and his mind readily falling into consideration of a lovely form and the possibilities, he moved closer.

"And my wife, ever that ? " he asked.

Marguerite blushed then choked down a sob. Here was another reason why she owed this man her protection, in that he had accorded her the liberty of her own desires. He had been so unfailingly courteous and considerate and she had given him nothing.

"Perhaps," she murmured, tears in her eyes. Henry took her hand and kissed it.

"Forgive me," he said. "But *they* married us,

we owe nothing to each other and so we can ally ourselves independently, friends in mutual esteem and protection : And perhaps . . .”

“ I may not love you yet, but I shall never betray you,” said Marguerite.

Charles now appeared. He drew Henry into his room, saying no word and looking like a sleep-walker. Henry’s gaze met his wife’s over the head of Charles : they supplicated her and she nodded, made a motion with her hand, bidding him be of good faith, and with that quickly left.

She found Charlotte in her rooms on her return. Charlotte had reflected on her interview with Clermont of that morning when she had warned him. “ You are in danger, in common with all Huguenots. Have a care.”

Clermont had laughed at her. “ I, care ? Catherine thinks too well of me for aught to befall me. As for Henry, surely you, who have so well consoled him for his lack of wifely attentions, can secure him safety in Paris ? ”

The Baroness had retorted, “ No more than Catherine has you. But being a second Diana de Poitiers has drawbacks.”

Clermont looked at her serious face. “ I do not flatter myself I ever commanded your love so you cannot have suffered through me.”

The Baroness replied : “ You jest. I have loved you ; not the soul-searing first love but the disciplined, practised love of a worldly woman. Love, nevertheless, though I shed no tear at your loss : and I fear for you.”

She had turned her back on him and walked to the door, but Clermont cried, “ Charlotte.”

Her hand had flown to her heart, then she turned

and met his embrace, the last she was to know. Through kisses she had whispered, "God protect thee, though if Catherine needs you all is well."

Clermont : "Forgive me turning to her. I must have been mad, but political needs oft stand in the way of honesty. What is that woman to me, only the arbitrator of my destiny—while you——" He had embraced her, passionately.

Charlotte's heart beat quicker at the memory of those kisses, and her instructions to Clermont to go to Marguerite's rooms if he wanted her or needed aid : then, as Marguerite came to her side, she asked, "Is all well for your husband ? "

Marguerite whispered, "Thank God, yes, he is with Charles," and quickly put her mind at rest regarding him ; but such was the perplexity and dread of both that they felt unstrung and they embraced each other and mingled their tears until both were startled by the sound of shots.

These followed immediately upon the strokes of the bell of Saint Germain, L'Auxerrois—the appointed signal for the Massacre ; and, even as the two women clung together, screams and cries of "murder" could be heard outside the Louvre, as the butchers went to work with a will.

Stark tragedy was abroad and the veil was torn ruthlessly from innocent eyes—exposing the utter callousness of maddened, lustful men.

The sweet young girl, praying through the long hours for an absent lover, was subjected to all the loathsome attributes of man and shared the fate of the young bride whose husband, slain before her eyes, begged her to kill herself quickly.

All the treasure store of "enemy" women was rifled, virginity shared the same fate as prostitution

and went mad 'ere the knife put an end for ever to a shocking revelation.

The brute beast raised its head in response to Catherine's decree, but she did not know it. Like all fanatics she saw only her aim, the preservation of her religion and the Throne : she was unconscious of the suffering in the zeal of her burning endeavour—blind to all else.

From the streets the infuriated Catholics burst into the houses of the Huguenots, killing, sooner or later, all whom they found ; the fierce shouts of the assailants mingled with the blood-curdling shrieks of the victims. Those resident within the Louvre could hear the piercing cries for aid of their Huguenot friends—who had been disarmed and were being thrust between the halberts of two lines of guards in the courtyard.

The handsome and charming De la Rochefoucault was caught in his room and thought a joke was being played until a halberd gashed his arm and a sword his neck. Twelve lay dead before the door of the King. The excitement proved too much for Charles ; the lust for blood arose as he visualized the hunt, and scarce knowing what he did he seized his arquebus and fired upon his own subjects. "Traitors, assassins," he cried as, from the windows, he fired upon unfortunate Calvinists who were swimming across the Seine in the attempt to reach Faubourg St. Germain.

The red river of blood became a torrent. Even children of tender years slew infants, many a man paid off a private grudge ; and the slaughter was so thorough that in a short time the streets and rivers were dammed up with the mutilated dead and dying. Men boasted of how many Huguenot throats they

had cut, while the terrible work went on over a very large area ; and Cruce, the watchmaker, asserted that his naked and gory arm had cut the throats of four hundred Huguenots in one day.

Pezou, a butcher, surpassed him.

"Bleed them, bleed the heretics," cried Henry de Guise, as he and his party traversed the streets—exhorting and encouraging the civic companies to the slaughter of their defenceless fellow-citizens and guests, his lust for blood having been aroused by the awful death of his sworn enemy. Admiral de Coligny was one of the first to suffer in the Massacre, for Henry de Guise and his men had awaited the signal from the shadows of the hotel in the Ruc de Bethisy, where the Admiral was staying with many of his party during his sojourn in Paris.

Such was Henry's anxiety to secure his victim that he was fearful he might escape, and he waited in impatience while his men broke into the hotel and sought out his victim.

The Navarrese guard and the man who had the keys were poignarded and three colonels of the French troops, at the head of the party, dashed upstairs to the Admiral's rooms and broke in. The wounded occupant having had the damaged finger amputated by Ambrose Paré, leaned, unarmed against the wall.

"Art thou Coligny ?" demanded Besme.

"I am, but have done naught for which to be ashamed or assaulted. You should respect my grey hairs." In reply he was run through with a sword. His face and body were mutilated with thrusts and he fell, writhing and weltering in blood.

"He is done for," said Besme to his master, from the window. "Monsieur D'Angouleme desires to

... .. then

see for himself," said De Guise, and as he looked up to the window of the Admiral's room his man came out on to the balcony with the mutilated body of the Admiral in his arms. With an effort Besme threw the Admiral over the balcony, where the body fell to the ground with a sickening thud.

A heavy groan shattered the momentary silence. "Murderer of my father," said Henry, planting a foot upon the breast of the dying man. "Thus do I avenge him."

With his last breath the aged Admiral cursed De Guise. "I did not slay thy father and I curse thee," he said; and Henry shuddered despite himself as a last flow of blood stained the silvery beard of the man he had hated and pulled down. Coligny's head was hacked off and dispatched to Catherine, who desired it ostensibly for balming, but who could say that the heads on which she practised in Rene's dungeon did not include this one?

De Guise felt horror-stricken but brought up the face of his father, dying at forty-four years of age through these, his enemies.

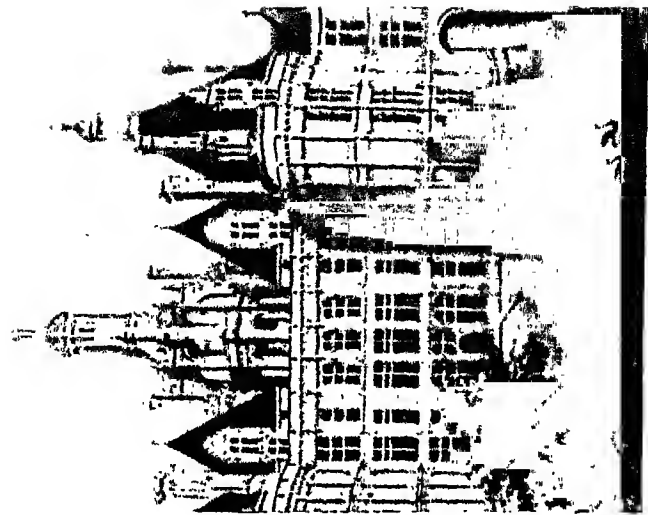
"To work, to work," he cried, shutting out horrid reflection: and, seeing some figures come flying from the hotel, he immediately gave chase to the desperate Huguenots.

The pursued had no chance. At the cries of the would-be assassins, others turned up: and at last, like stags at bay, they were dispatched in a welter of blood.

The terrible work, once commenced, went on, and on, and on. The disguises of noble ladies were penetrated, and they shared the general fate—raped, stabbed and thrown into the river, the handy and dread clearing-ground. Small boys dragged



GUISE AND THE CORPSE OF COLIGNY



THE CHÂTEAU OF CHAMBORD

infants at the end of strings ; many hid, but few escaped.

Those on Catherine's list, the leaders, were hunted down and dispatched during a fearful three days' slaughter in Paris : and gradually, while lessening in ferocity, the Massacre embraced Huguenots of every class in almost all of the Provinces up to seventy thousand souls.

Within the Louvre Catherine was watching the effect of Rene's paste upon a young dog. The place on the dog's mouth quickly became red. A yellow ridge appeared all about it, oozing putrefaction. A froth grew as the poison spread ; six hours of fever and general inflammation, and gangrene would result in death.

Catherine was satisfied. Handing the little creature to a page, she ordered it to be destroyed, and made her way through the now almost deserted corridors to Charlotte's room.

The Baroness had left Marguerite with the confession that she had been ordered by Catherine to make sure Henry visited her that night. She was overjoyed to know he was safe, believing Charles would respect the life of his sister's husband even though Catherine intended him injury. She returned to her rooms at about twelve-thirty and was lying in bed in a dressing-robe, but not undressed, when Catherine approached. Had it been Henry, as she hoped, La Dariole would have cheerfully announced him : now, a deadly silence warned her. She recollected that Henry was supposed to be in the City, as she lay listening with a beating heart.

The curtain over the doorway was swung aside, Catherine appeared and noted the single occupant of the bed.

"Have you seen Henry of Navarre?"

"No, Madame, but doubtless he will visit me when he returns for the night."

"You look pale," said Catherine, her baleful glance resting on the fair, rosy face on the pillow, "and your lips are grey."

Catherine walked over to the dressing-table and quickly exchanged the boxes of lip-paste. Turning back to the bed she said, "You have plenty with which to remedy it. Use it unsparingly or, lest you know it, Henry will prefer my daughter and I shall call you hideous and a fool."

She departed. La Dariole hastened to comfort her mistress, who, knowing Henry would not visit her, made no attempt to do Catherine's bidding, fortunately for herself; but lay thinking. Her mind reviewed the recent happenings and tears ran down her cheeks as she reflected on the fate that had so nearly touched those she still had affection for, and for the fate of their brothers.

Meanwhile, Catherine, reviewing the secret conduct of both the Baroness and Marguerite, came to the conclusion that they were conspiring against her to save Henry of Navarre.

She took up a position in the corridor and was soon rewarded by the sight of La Dariole hastening into Marguerite's suite. In a few moments Marguerite hastened out, followed by both La Dariole and Gillonne, and entered the rooms of the Baroness, then she slipped into Marguerite's room and searched the place, thinking, "Henry, doubtless, will hide in here. I must warn the guard."

She hastened to give orders that no one was to leave the rooms of the Baroness, then set a trap for Henry to walk into.

Meanwhile, Clermont became uneasy at the cries of murder all around. He wished to be with Henry of Navarre, and since he knew from Charlotte he could go to Marguerite's apartments he thought there he might find the King.

To his surprise a guard stood outside his door, his sword barring it.

"Withdraw, I would leave."

"Monsieur will pardon me, but it is impossible."

"What!" Drawing his sword he drove under the fellow's guard a lightning pass that, in his apprehension, went deeper than he intended. With a groan the guard fell to the floor and lay still. Clermont bent over him as the sounds of firing increased and died away; then, on the inspiration of self-security, took the cloak of the dead guard and sallied forth.

Crossing to the Louvre he made his way by the usual entrance as of old, and soon he entered the dim corridor; and finding Marguerite's rooms empty he sat on the divan in the ill-lit *salon* and fingered his sword apprehensively. Maureval, mistaking him for Henry, posted his men, then entered with five of his trained fighters. Those without the door heard little, for what is one against six. A light passing of blade upon blade, a heavy groan that sent thrills up their spines, then a deathly silence. Maureval wiped his sword upon the doublet of the dead man, then hastened from the blood-stained room to inform Catherine. Her eyes glittered.

"At last," she cried, and fairly ran to gaze upon the body of her dead foe.

In the flickering firelight she saw the still form stretched in all the disarray of death. The man lay on his face, arms outstretched to touch the sword

that lay beyond, and Catherine's face twisted in a sneer as she spurned the body with her foot and turned it over.

"At last, thou my enemy art stretched at my feet." Gloatingly she kneeled and scanned the still face, then her heart almost ceased to beat.

A piercing scream burst from her lips. "*Clermont ! Mon Dieu ! Mon Dieu !* What ghastly mistake is this," her anguished sobs breaking out. "No. No. It cannot be."

She brought a taper and held it close, then flung it from her. "Oh that it were a dream. They shall pay, with their lives. My poor, dead love." She took the head upon her knees, uncaring of the blood that stained her gown, and gazed at the bloody features.

"Alas, what fate is this which dogs my steps and slays my hopes, while the object of my hatred goes free !" She sobbed, then laid down the head and stood like an avenging force. "But I will pull him down yet, and God aid me to avenge my love and my hate upon him."

Staggering, she left the room to fling herself upon the bed in her own apartments, weeping bitterly. Soon she recovered and in a grim state cursed Heaven for holding her to her word, then in bitter energy issued further orders and took some food and wine to restore her shattered nerves.

By the time Marguerite was freed not a spot of blood remained in her room.

Catherine now departed down the Bois de Bologne to the Château of Madrid. The atmosphere was heavy, rain fell in torrents, and all about was the reek of blood. The rattle of musketry sounded distantly as she knelt in the chapel upon a hassock,

praying, while agitated by keen emotion. Four men, carrying a corpse on a bier, now appeared.

They placed the corpse in a coffin near the altar, and one, approaching Catherine, said, "Madame, it is done."

Catherine bowed lower, for the corpse was that of her favourite. His death cost the Queen a terrible pang, for she loved him, and her fury rose to a pitiless fanaticism.

Meanwhile, at the first stroke of the tocsin, Giordano, Maureval and Coconnas—sitting in the hotel, La Mole having been accorded the room—started up. "It has begun," cried Maureval. "Come."

"Wait, there is a Huguenot in the house," said the host. "I must make the house safe for my wife and children, lest he discover our absence and make a raid of his own."

"Aha, La Mole," said Coconnas, and followed Giordano up the stairs. The door of the room was quickly dashed open, but La Mole was ready for them, apprehension having warned him ill-work was afoot.

Dressed and with pistols in his hands and his sword in his teeth, he retreated into the closet and locked the door as they entered his room.

Throwing the small window open, he climbed precariously down the roof to an outhouse and fled in the direction of the Admiral's hotel, while pistol shots shattered the lock.

Baulked of their prey, the hunters hurried outside. No sign of La Mole, but two fugitives came running past, hotly pursued. Giordano fired and brought one down, but as he approached to finish him off, the victim feebly raised himself on one knee and prepared

to use his dagger. A ball through the head completed his murder, and the assailant turned to find his friend engaged with the other.

"Viper," cried Coconnas, and ran him through and through, thrilling to the spurt of warm blood from a fallen foe.

"To work," cried Maureval, and they pursued the road, ready for killing, until they reached the Admiral's hotel. Here a great concourse filled the court and street. The shrieks of Teligny could be heard, and the unholy movement within lighted rooms plainly seen. A bleeding figure came flying through an open window: La Mole. Having been too late to warn Coligny, he now considered his chances of life, as, with a spring, he recovered his balance and darted away down the road.

"A thousand devils. It is La Mole," cried Coconnas, and darted in pursuit of the wounded man, who turned and cut his erstwhile companion across his face with his rapier. Coconnas roared as a two-inch gash on the brow bled furiously.

La Mole reached the Louvre and sped like the wind past the disordered sentries, whose cuirasses and helmets gleamed in the light of burning Huguenot effects, piled in the street. Into the vestibule, up the staircase, he went, blood dripping from him, and at last he could go no further on his way to warn Henry of Navarre.

He leaned against a door and recognizing it as Marguerite's, he struck violently, calling: "Navarre Navarre," praying it may be opened to him.

The door was opened by Gillonne, who, startled, saw a figure dash forward through the lighted chambers till he reached the last room.

Here, in a luxurious bed of carved oak with velvet

hangings, lay Marguerite, in a white dressing cloak. Her dark hair, unbound and flooding the snowy pillows, made a background for her beautiful face. La Mole, stood, swaying, then fell on his knee.

"Madame, they are murdering my brothers. Where is the King! Save us."

Marguerite got out of bed. Blood dripping from La Mole's shoulder splattered the carpet and stained her feet. The pursuers now entered, for the door was open, and prominent among the body of men with drawn swords, pikes and arquebuses in bloody hands, was Coconnas. Marguerite's shrieks rang out, La Mole clung to her knees and she dragged a coverlet from the bed and cast it over him. While the onlookers paused at the sight, the Duc d'Alençon, very disordered, appeared. Marguerite threw out appealing arms.

"François, François." He approached her. "Save me, my brother," she cried, and moved toward him. He was ignorant that, lying under the coverlet on the floor, was La Mole, who had fainted.

"Ha, murder the children of France, will you. Without there. Captain of the Guard, hang these rascals."

The rabble jostled to escape and left the disordered room in as great a hurry as they had entered it, but moved by a reverse emotion. D'Alençon spoke.

"Are you injured, my sister?"

"No, leave me," she said.

The Prince willingly obeyed. Quickly Marguerite locked the doors and examined the prostrate man, whom she had recognized as the gentleman who, but a few hours before, had impressed her with his appearance. She wiped the blood from the handsome face, now distorted in pain; and as she applied

smelling salts he stirred and opened his eyes. "*Mon Dieu*. Murder most foul!"

"You are safe," whispered the Queen.

"Oh, most lovely Queen," he said and fainted.

Marguerite staunches his wounds and considered what to do.

Gillonne was hastily dispatched and in a few moments arrived with a casket containing balm. Marguerite used La Mole's dagger to remove his clothing, the blood was washed away and he was soon bandaged and perfumed. Marguerite noted his finely modelled form and as she and Gillonne carried him to a large divan under the open window and put a quilt over him, she reflected upon the beauty of the male form, as strong and muscular as the female form is soft and dainty. She brooded over the unconscious man. Meanwhile her husband was undergoing great mental strain, conscious of the dread event even then in process of execution, and himself alone.

His brother, the Prince de Conti, was brought to join him in the secret passage and, after a wait of over an hour, Charles sent for them, the attendants spattered with blood.

He received them with flashing eyes and, with the excitement of the insane, told them that the admiral and other rebel chiefs had been slain, as heretics.

They would be saved on condition of changing their religion, for he would suffer none but Catholics about him.

"You are pleased to be here, I doubt not," he said: as, drawing Henry to the window, he pointed out the forms of assassins in process of cutting throats and flinging the bodies of Huguenots into the river.

The flames of the Hôtel de Bourbon could be seen,



MARGUERITE, QUEEN OF NAVARRE, AND LA MOLE, THE FUGITIVE
HUGUENOT

a flaming background to that living Hell, and Henry shuddered.

"I take it, Sire, that the victims had a similar choice and refused."

"Ha, do you suppose I troubled to offer the choice of Mass to those? Will *you* accept?"

Henry felt beads of perspiration rise upon his forehead. "Death or the Bastille in preference to Mass, eh," said Charles, and took up his arquebus in a blind fury.

"Would you murder me," exclaimed Henry.

"Who speaks of murder," said a voice, and all turned, to find Catherine within the room.

"Madame," said Henry, "I do. This is murder and your work. You made your daughter the bait to destroy us."

"Yes, but it shall not be," cried Marguerite, as she too entered: having changed and set forth to see how her husband fared. She went to his side, and took his hand.

"Remember, Sire, you made him my husband," she said, looking steadily at Charles.

"Faith, Madame, you are right. Harry is my brother-in-law." Catherine now indicated she wished to be alone with Charles, and the two brothers and Marguerite departed. Catherine wished to assure Charles that she would soon prove her statement that Henry did not know Marguerite as wife, despite Marguerite's seeming affection.

She believed that now Navarre would go to Charlotte, thus two avenues of death awaited, the poisoned paste and the poisoned book; and she rubbed her hands together in satisfaction at the prospect.

However, Marguerite took Henry to see the

invalid, La Mole ; while in Charlotte's room another scene was being enacted. Charlotte, mindful of how she had planned to outwit Catherine's command to have Navarre visit her, could not rest, so she got out of bed and paced the floor—while La Dariole lay upon the divan at the foot of the bed.

She paused to look at herself in the glass.

How pale her lips looked ! Idly, she lifted up the various toilet articles, and paused with the poisoned box in her hand. Surely she had used more of the paste ?

As she stood, a ghostly tapping was heard upon the secret panel. Charlotte stood rigid. Who was this ? Henry ? He did not usually come secretly. Perhaps he was wounded, dying. God forbid ! She hastened after La Dariole and watched the panel slide back, with fearful eyes.

The dark, cowed figure of Rene, stood within the entrance, his eyes great burning orbs in his pale face. Hastening back to his apartment after Catherine had freed him, he had peered deep into the magic mirror and, fascinated, had been the perfect medium for the manifestation of the so-called supernatural.

The mirror had darkened as he concentrated all his will to evoke the manifestation that would give him the clue to events, and form a guide for the future.

Bubbles of light, rising and falling, illuminated a kind of bloodless, transparent larvæ that swiftly swarmed over the face of the mirror ; secret life that, like secret thoughts, have a power for good or evil, according to the sender forth. These unsymmetrical shapes grouped together and formed a pair of eyes—malignant, serpent-like. Their fixed intensity upon a given spot caused Rene to tear away his riveted,

hypnotized gaze from them and change the immediate point of focus, and as he did so miniature figures came to life in the mirror, watched by those terrible eyes and Rene's.

Rene had known what was passing before his gaze, that the eyes were Catherine's, and the figures representative of her thoughts; and had felt the whole room vibrate to the deadly, unholy mind waves she emanated.

The tiny figures were mostly in the last paroxysms of death. Incongruous, grotesque and fearfully real, they came and went in panoramic view—enemies with whom Catherine had summarily dealt by the gentle aids of the strangler, the poisoner—himself, he had reflected—butcher Caboche, and deep *oubliettes* of whose secret openings only Catherine was aware.

Yawning pits could open before the feet of the unwary by the displacing of a great stone flag in a dark corridor: the whole mattress and bottom of a fine four-post bed could drop on oiled hinges and precipitate the sleeping occupant into a slimy underground waterway at the press of a button far removed: and many an unguessed pit concealed a rotting heap of dead who—maimed in the fall and dying pitifully inch by inch among the already dead, or previously murdered then conveniently concealed—shared the common grave.

Other figures could be seen resisting and warding off her design by strength of mind and counter-plot, as in the case of Henry of Navarre, about whom Rene had descried the mystical aurora, that—shed by the living thought and tangible wish of his gentle mother—still formed a protection from the darts of the woman whom she knew was responsible for her own death.

A Royal crown of scintillating diamonds hung suspended over the head of the figure, who stood still under the magnetic eyes like a bird fascinated by a serpent, then threw out beams of courage and fearlessness as he spurred his mind to resistance.

As Rene watched the eyes had grown dim, their evil power counteracted by that purposeful demeanour, then the figure of Navarre was replaced by that of Charlotte, her feet in a river of blood. She was, indeed, pitiful: the eyes grew clearer and stronger again and sparkled as Charlotte opened her hand and revealed therein the poisoned paste. With a start Rene had got to his feet, breaking the spell.

Crossing himself and muttering strange words, he had hurried back to the Louvre just in time. He drew in his breath sharply as he looked at the startled Baroness.

"The Paste," he whispered, and, as she brought up her hand containing it, he snatched it. "You have not used it?"

"No."

"Good. Now listen. Henry of Navarre shall not suffer death by such a means, even if the Queen-Mother doubt my skill. A brilliant destiny awaits him, and I save him that you and he may remember it when destiny fulfils herself. Will you?" Charlotte could only nod.

"Good. I told you to lock away your pastes. Be sure to do so for the future."

He withdrew his head, the aperture closed; and once more the two women lay down to try and find in slumber cessation of the alarms of the night.

Charles, to divert his mind after Catherine took her leave, took down the book on hawking. Avidly,

he turned over the pages, wetting his finger to separate those which so annoyingly stuck together.

Deeply interested, the hours passed without his notice until, at last, a burning sensation suggested he was thoroughly over-tired. He went into his apartments and as he passed the open door of her room he saw the figure of his old Huguenot nurse, rigid in prayer.

Regret, hopeless and unavailing, stung him. In helpless anger he turned back, called for his courtiers, and with them traversed the streets—a company revoltingly in contrast to the traces of the Massacre visible on every wall in every thoroughfare. At last, almost fainting, he returned ; and went to bed at last in a stupor.

Catherine lay in bed dreaming of the success of her plans, Charlotte reflecting upon the cruelties of life,—Marguerite of the two men who talked in the adjoining room, both of whom she was to come to love.

CHAPTER X

AFTERMATH

EARLY the following morning Charles passed an order revoking the one for the Massacre, but now the hunt was up his new order was not heeded.

Coconnas, having ranged the streets all night in search of victims with a party including Giordano and Maureval, had come into solitary conflict with De Mouy and was worsted. He was rescued by the Duchess of Nevers, who, having seen him fall under the window of her hotel, sent out attendants to bring him in, when she succumbed to his red-haired personality, while De Mouy made his way into the Louvre in anxiety for his master—Henry of Navarre—and thanking Providence for his fencing skill, to which he owed his life.

Thus it occurred that the two friends, Marguerite and the Duchess, respectively, nursed the two enemies; while De Mouy, seen entering Henry's apartment, was now mistaken for Henry. Again report was sent to Catherine.

"Ha, he has left Marguerite and deserted Charlotte," she thought: and immediately sent out a message for Maureval. The guard soon found him and he hastened to the Louvre to learn Catherine's bidding.

"Navarre is now in his room," she said, in ignorance that he was at that moment asleep in

Marguerite's ante-room. "Take six men and make him prisoner: and if he resists, well, it won't matter if he is hurt. Get him, and let there be no mistake this time, or you shall pay with your head as the other blunderers have paid for the last."

Maureval returned to choose his best men and Catherine waited in a fever of anticipation. Surely, with three modes of death threatening him, Henry would not escape?

De Mouy, his anxiety increasing, paced the floor of the dimly lit room, then put his pistols on the table near the lamp, drew it up to the bed and stretched himself on the luxurious mattress.

The blood from several minor wounds had congealed, he was weary and tired: and soon, despite himself, he slept, oblivious to his danger in the room of his King. He dreamed of love and thrilled to passionate kisses as death drew near.

Six guards, gliding down the corridor, paused at the door, sword in hand, dagger in belt: led by Maureval with loaded pistols in his belt. The Captain spoke quietly.

"Listen. I have *carte blanche* to prevent the prisoner calling out or resisting." The guards hesitated. Quoth one—"But this is the suite of the King of Navarre."

Maureval produced the order from Catherine from his doublet. "Two will guard either end of the corridor, two the door of the room, the others will enter with me, for see, here is the order—signed by the Queen-Mother—which proves that a King to-night is no different to any other Huguenot."

At the signal, the door-handle was turned: and sweet oblivion ceased, suddenly, as the apprehensive

De Mouy awoke and armed himself, and took his stand behind the bed curtains.

"To work," said Maureval, and the three entered. Suddenly Maureval halted. It was as though a ghost had arisen to confront him.

"De Mouy!" he gasped.

"Murderer of my father," cried the young Huguenot, as, firing his pistols at both the guards simultaneously, he drew his sword and thrust it through the throat of the astonished Maureval. Two balls buried themselves in the wall, and the ensuing deathly silence was broken by a choking cry as Maureval fell. Swiftly knocking over the table and lamp, so that a dense darkness filled the room and bewildered the two guards, De Mouy darted upon the guards at the door, evading miraculously two strokes. His sword flashed, then he darted down the corridor, knocking over another guard and receiving not a scratch, leaving a dead man behind him.

As he paused at a flight of stairs, uncertain as to whether to go up or down, a door opened and the dishevelled head of D'Alençon looked out. The tread of the pursuing guards approached. De Mouy thrust aside the startled Prince.

"De Mouy," he whispered, "I thought I heard a shot."

De Mouy stepped inside his room and, leaning against the panel of the closed door, quietly explained the position as the sounds of pursuit died away, the guards swearing fearfully as they tore past.

"If Henry of Navarre does not survive Catherine's hatred, we may talk further as to appointing you head of the Huguenots," he said meaningly, and D'Alençon knew he must play protector. It would



AFTER ST BARTHOLOMEW CATHERINE DE MEDICIS VIEWING THE VICTIMS OF THE
MASSACRE
(Catherine followed by Marguerite and Charlotte, compliments Naureval after the Massacre)

need to be in secret, of course, for he dare not risk disclosure of his fond ambition to rule somehow, somewhere. "You had better remain here," he said, and De Mouy sat down, thankfully.

The sound of pistol shots warned Catherine. She waited—and, when all was silent, took up her lamp and advanced like a shadow to the outer entrance, to Henry of Navarre's apartments. There lay a guard with his head split open, and another run through the body, while inside the bedchamber lay Maureval in a death-like posture, blood forming pools within the room. Heaven help her, Henry had again escaped !

Maureval stirred and tried to speak, but could not ; and the Queen, bending over him, quickly removed from his tunic the order she had given him.

Suddenly D'Alençon entered, driven by a necessity to see what was doing. Catherine turned and fixed him with a fierce glance.

"You here ?"

"Yes, Madame, I thought I heard shots."

"Return to your room, you will learn in due course."

He went away, satisfied that Maureval could not tell Catherine who had wounded him so grievously, while Catherine returned, full of foreboding, her feet leaving bloody tracks down the corridor.

While Henry lived, she felt herself robbed of the full savour of triumph. He was too strong for her, more than flesh and blood. He would live despite her, reign despite her. She reached her room at last, filled with torturing doubts. She realized that all her efforts against him, so far, had failed ; that she had spent herself in vain.

Alone in the vastness of her room, she felt suddenly

old and feeble, her desolate mind at breaking point ; a painful lethargy warned her she had overtaxed nature, a moaning petulance weighed her.

Face ghastly, eyes burning but unseeing, she sat, with disordered hair and limp shoulders, as one stricken by the hand of God in the pursuit of unholy endeavour. The picture of despair incarnate, she tasted the bitterness of death, while waves of spiritual and mental rebellion flooded her mind.

Thousands of victims and she could not effect the death of one man.

The success of her main policy failed to give any satisfaction, owing to a fearful conviction of defeat in the midst of success.

CHAPTER XI

EXCURSIONS INTO LOVE

THE following morning arose bright and sunny, disclosing the remains of the shambles of the night.

D'Alençon, anxious to trace out a path of dominance and undecided as to whether it could best be reached by a Catholic or Protestant policy, sought Marguerite.

De Mouy remained secretly hidden in his room, a dangerous guest, since he knew all the details of D'Alençon's ambitious scheming. Henry of Navarre and La Mole were kept out of sight in Marguerites' boudoir when Gillonne informed her mistress that her brother desired audience: and François, in ignorance of Henry's whereabouts, proceeded subtly to question his sister, after pressing his bloodless lips to her pale forehead in greeting.

Having emphasized all the awful details of the night at length, in hope of finding out which way the wind blew, he proceeded.

"Did you not tell me, sister, that you had no love for Henry of Navarre?"

"That was before I knew him."

"And now?"

"Well, one is either extremely happy or desperately miserable in marriage. Which do I look?"

François scrutinized her face. An inward radiance

showed in the sparkling eyes and the curve of the lovely lips.

"You love. Whom? De Guise or your husband?"

"I love no one."

"Then had the Huguenots gained favour, perhaps you would have loved Henry?"

"Perhaps, but in destroying the Huguenots, De Guise is King of France."

Satisfied he could gain naught from Marguerite, D'Alençon retired, in puzzled thought.

Word now arrived asking Marguerite to accompany Catherine on a pilgrimage to the hawthorn of the Cemetery of the Innocents. A page was dismissed to prepare a horse, and soon she accompanied Catherine, Charles and the chief Catholics to the people's cries of "Vive le Roi!"

At Montfaucon the vilely mutilated body of the Admiral was to be seen, hanging by the thighs on great hooks after having been decapitated, burned and dragged through the streets. The sight was sickening and gruesome, and Marguerite averted her eyes from the hideous spectacle as the perfumed company rode past.

The Baroness now whispered to her friend what she had recently learned through La Dariole, from Francis the sentry, of the ill fate of the Count Clermont. No wonder Catherine looked pale and grim, she thought, and once again pitied her mother. Charlotte, too, was pitiful, grieving inwardly over the murder in which she was so intimately interested yet supposedly unaware.

On the return journey the party met the Duc de Guise and many gentlemen, escorting a gorgeous litter.

"Ha," cried Charles, "the beautiful Duchess de

Nevers, I warrant. Let me compliment you, Madame," as she appeared at the opening and bowed, "on the rescue of a daring Catholic."

"Sire, I rejoice I saved him."

Strange, thought Marguerite, that her friend had saved a Catholic and she a Huguenot.

The Duchess stepped out and curtsied to the King, then approached Marguerite, who dismounted.

They kissed. "Get away," whispered the Duchess : then aloud : "I found the Greek books you desired. If you will join me we can go and get them. Will you deign to use my litter ?"

Marguerite looked at her mother, who replied, irritably :

"Be gone, Henrietta, and take Marguerite with you."

Joyfully they obeyed, and once inside the litter and hidden from prying eyes, heartily embraced.

"Where are we going, Henrietta ?"

"To the hotel. I am free of my husband and family for a space. Free !" She laughed merrily.

"You sound happy."

"Indeed, yes, love makes me so. As your guilty confidante rather than respectful servant, I love ! And you, are you indeed raped of your virginity ?"

"By whom ?"

"Your husband, of course."

Both laughed amusedly.

"Tell me, do you differentiate between Catholics and Huguenots ?" said Marguerite, in a puzzled fashion.

"Why, Marguerite, in politics, yes ; in love, no : Women are infidel in love as they have been down the ages, and worship the god Eros, Cupido and Amor, whose eyes are bandaged."

"And their own," sighed Marguerite. "Charles said you rescued a Catholic. Tell me about it. Is he handsome and grateful?"

"Yes, but the devil knows how Charles heard of it. I would choose a Huguenot as readily, had he the brave qualities of my pupil."

"Good. Now I will tell you; a beautiful young Huguenot took refuge in my room, a very Apollo. He, too, is very grateful."

Henrietta shook a playful finger, "And he interests you?"

"Only for humanity, to be sure": and Marguerite smiled.

"It is dangerous, is it not?"

"I wonder. He deplores this danger to me, and yet fancies he is in a greater danger through me." She lowered her eyes.

"Ha, he thinks he falls in love?" chuckled Henrietta.

"Yes, as though I could prevent it." They now arrived at the hotel and proceeded quietly up to Henrietta's apartments.

Here she slightly opened the door and peeped through, and proudly motioned Marguerite to look. A gasp of astonishment indicated Marguerite's surprise, as she recognized one of the raiding party of the previous night. She fled downstairs and returned to the litter, the Duchess following, in concern.

"Whatever is wrong?"

"My good friend, this pupil of yours is undoubtedly after the blood of mine. He attempted to kill him in my apartment."

"Mordi; then we must keep them apart till they prepare to be friends."

"I have placed La Mole under Henry's protection. To-night I will convince my mother, through Madame de Sauve, that my husband and I are really married, and keep both in safety about me, lest in losing Henry I lose also La Mole, and a Crown to boot."

"Be calm. I will arrange a rendezvous for all four in that discreet love-nest we know of, facing the Rue de Jouy in the Rue St. Antoine." They kissed.

"Make it soon, Henrietta, for my protégée will quickly be well," said Marguerite who—borrowing the litter—returned to the Louvre and in the corridor met Charlotte—who had been instructed, as anticipated, to get in touch with Navarre at once.

She told Marguerite of the note she had written under the eye of Catherine—who had called her a blundering fool—beseeching Henry to visit her; a note sent by Catherine's page to Marguerite's room, where Henry was now known to be, along with the intimation he could use his own rooms in safety.

The two fair conspirators parted, Charlotte supposedly to prepare for Henry's visit, Marguerite to find Henry and La Mole deep in conversation. Both saluted the Queen as she paused and noted their air of alert vigour. Henry discussed returning to his own apartment and it was decided both he and La Mole should share them for the time being.

Having instructed her husband, Marguerite dismissed both, and prepared for a ride in the forests of Saint Germain—which was to be attended by Henry, under the protection of Charles, who was determined to make a Catholic of his new brother-in-law.

As Henry entered the courtyard to join the party, a voice whispered, "God keep Henry of Navarre."

Henry looked round and perceived De Mouy at the Duc d'Alençon's window.

Henry fiddled with his gloves, "Come to me at ten to-night," he returned.

The gorgeous calvalcade set off, headed by the King, who looked like a corpse inhabited by an imp. His temper was atrocious, and he brutally used his horse in the attempt to assuage his vile humour and feverishness.

The broad avenues of the forest were shady and cool: the thick-leaved trees varying in hues from gold to bronze, green to silver. Under the leafy arches they progressed and all at once Charles dug spurs into his high-spirited horse, who started and was away like the wind. Henry, on a keen little Bearnais horse, pursued him, the rest stringing out behind; and sure enough, Charles took a toss into a thicket. Suddenly, a boar broke from the wood, hair bristling, and made for the prostrate figure of the King of France. "*Diable*," cried D'Alençon, and with a strained look on his face he drew his pistol and fired.

The shot missed the boar and buried itself in the leafy soil alarmingly near his brother. The boar's tusks grazed the King's thigh as Henry reached the spot, dismounted and plunged a flashing blade behind the boar's shoulder, holding it there while Charles got, trembling, to his feet.

"Thanks, Harry," he said, his hand extended. The boar being dead, Henry withdrew his knife, dug it into the ground to clean it, and replaced it in its sheath, 'ere he took the proffered hand.

"Sire, I rejoice you are not hurt."

The courtiers and ladies, having given vent to cries of horror, renewed their exclamations as the

King swayed, drunkenly. Supported by the arm of the man he had desired to assassinate, he soon recovered, a gleam of gratitude in his bloodshot eyes.

Twilight was falling over the land as they returned slowly to the Louvre, the sky's diamonded stars twinkling in opposition to the sun, which sank, blood-red, beyond the horizon.

In saving the life of Charles, Henry prevented two kingdoms from changing hands: the Duc d'Anjou from being King of France; D'Alençon, King of Poland.

Did the latter purposely fumble his aim, wondered Henry?

He realized that he had repaid Charles well: the life he had saved representing something to look to for security.

The Huguenots, who had offered to him the Throne of Navarre—which belonged to him by inheritance—because they wished to reconstitute it, were themselves divided, and not to be trusted.

Indeed, he knew that certain of them looked to find a chief in D'Alençon, since Henry had chosen to ally himself with the house of Valois, and seemed more ready to neglect the limited position of Prince of Navarre than was desirable to their minds.

Far from exerting himself to carry out the high ambitions of his chiefs, he appeared careless of them: thus they turned to D'Alençon, possible heir to the Throne of France and certainly sufficiently ambitious and elevated to be a weighty head of themselves.

D'Alençon was swayed, in holding off the proposals, by fear lest Charles died while D'Anjou was in Poland and he himself missed the chance of claiming the Throne of France, his inheritance in his brother's absence. It was his intrigue that had caused

Catherine's withdrawal of favour from Henry of the house of Montmorenci, whom she had marked down for death, but who had retired to secret chambers in his Castle of Chantilly three days ago and looked like escaping.

At ten o'clock, De Mouy made an excuse to leave D'Alençon's rooms and return to those of Henry of Navarre. He found La Mole there, almost well, and Henry drew him out of earshot.

"Have you learned aught from D'Alençon?"

"Sire, he holds his tongue close so that I know not how far he will go with our party, but he seems not ill-pleased to be the keeper of such a dangerous fellow-conspirator as myself."

"Good. Let us leave our discussion until two mornings hence at ten o'clock. I will know better where we stand by then." De Mouy frowned.

"Sire, were it not better to leave at once and ensure our heads upon our shoulders?"

"Nay, De Mouy, we are safe thus far, and with Madame Marguerite and D'Alençon aiding us and Charles liking me, I throw down the gauntlet to Catherine. The massacre is over, but what remnants of my adherents remain are scattered. They will return, however, and then Catherine will see how a fallen foe can rise again."

De Mouy was dismissed and returned in troubled thought whence he had come.

That night Maureval in a dying state, had the services of the Abbé Gondi.

Catherine hoped he would recover and speak, and was greatly concerned about his precarious condition.

When all in the Louvre had retired, she took up the familiar lamp and proceeded to Marguerite's room, confident she could win, through her, the life of

Henry of Navarre from Charles, despite the increased favour with which he was now regarded. An unlucky chance had made Henry the saviour of the life of Charles, she reflected ; but soon, with the full evidence of the connection between Henry and Charlotte plainly visible on their faces, she would achieve her objective. As she approached her daughter's rooms, in the belief her husband was absent, Marguerite was informed, and, her little tableau in readiness, threw herself into bed.

The sound of a key turning in the lock, broke the eerie silence. "Who is there?" she called, and languidly arose, delicately shading a yawn. "Ah, *you*, Madame."

Catherine smiled, believing her daughter to have arisen fresh from solitary slumber.

"Be seated. We must talk."

"Readily, Madame."

"My dear child, it tore my heart to see the bravery with which you denied you were a lonely and forsaken wife. Stay," as Marguerite attempted to speak, "your brother and I desire only to see you happy. We are aware that in basing your marriage upon a political interest we overlooked your own happiness : and in some measure to appease your bleeding heart at Henry's callousness towards a daughter of France, we will heal your wounds from this insolent man.

"How, Madame."

"We shall separate you at the first opportunity and free you from insult and personal neglect."

"But Madame, he is my husband."

"Mordi, the Church has blessed you, but as for aught else come with me to Madame Sauve's apartment. You shall see how he spends his nights."

"You are mistaken. See." Marguerite, with a deliberate gesture, pulled aside the curtains of the bed and disclosed Henry's proud profile upon the pillow, reposing in calm disorder.

Catherine drew back, pale as death.

She had perforce to believe the evidence of her own eyes; and, managing to convey a kind of congratulation she was far from feeling, she departed, more than ever convinced Henry had the devil's own resource. The poisoned book had, so far, availed naught, likewise the paste. Could she prevail over Charles?

Charles was ill and she stopped on her way back, to inquire his condition of his nurse.

Madelon, soft footed, was moving about the bedside of the prostrate monarch, ignorant that his illness was caused by the object of which he was most fond. A few whispered words and Catherine went to her room, where she offered up fervent prayers for the full success of her schemes, the blood of her victims scarce dry upon the bricks of Paris.

The following night, Marguerite sent by Gillonne a note to La Mole, arranging a rendezvous at a private house, where discreet suites were at the service of the moneyed.

She and Henrietta had arranged supper for four, and here she arrived a few minutes before the appointed time, in a private litter, masked.

The concierge, fully aware that visitors of quality were in the habit of making use of his love-nests, was sufficiently well paid to ignore identities.

Marguerite went upstairs, to find Henrietta and her stalwart lover already there; indeed, they were indulging in the playful and harmless practice of fortune-telling by the hand, seated upon a low couch

covered with cloth of silver drapery and many gorgeous cushions.

Henrietta retained very little apparel beyond her mask, and after supper, of course, that would be discarded—privacy being assured.

Marguerite glanced round the apartment which had seen many an amorous revel, noting the statuary and magnificent paintings that had looked upon sheer license and were themselves indicative of the voluptuous abandon of license.

The room was not large but lofty, and had evidently been furnished with an eye to influencing the visitors. It was richly carpeted, and from the ceiling hung three mosaic lamps shedding dim violet, scarlet and pale rose lights. On either side of the tapestried door stood parian marble statues, one representing Venus and the other Aphrodite of Cnidus: the air was heavy with the scent of the fumes of the narcotic *cannabis sativa*—the basic substance of the *bharg* of the Mohammedans, and the heavy gold-fringed hangings of wine-coloured velvet presented a barbaric gorgeousness.

Indeed, the general effect was *bizarrie*, the glance falling on Flemish sepulchral vases, runic tablets, Tamil scriptures, mediæval gemmed reliquaries and Brahmin gods: while from an invisible music-box came the low, liquid tinkling of sweet music.

Here nobles and princes brought their mistresses, mostly actresses from the Opera—of which the Court was extremely fond: and often, when all the world was abed and every honest man and woman asleep, every suite in the fine old house hid all the varieties and grades of love behind discreet velvet curtains and locked doors.

“Behold my cavalier, Marguerite.”

"I have already noted him. Hum, I can see why you chose him."

Henrietta burst into merriment, for, to be sure, Coconnas made a lusty figure, full of fire and passion in vindication of his red poll.

"Pray what detains your Adonis. Is he indisposed?"

"I trust not. Ah, here he is"; as a tap at the door took her attention. She opened it a fraction, then threw it wide in welcome. La Mole, still pale, and, indeed, looking as beautiful as a woman, entered swiftly, closed the door and fell on one knee before the masked figure.

"Well, why don't you rise?"

"Madame, I am unworthy. I did not dare to hope."

"Do not tell me you did not dream."

"Ah," clutching her hand and pressing burning kisses thereon: "such beautiful dreams, too heavenly to be realized."

"Arise, we shall see if heaven cannot be persuaded to come down to earth." She locked the door and drew him toward the inner-room, where Henrietta was gazing, dumbfounded, at Coconnas.

His fresh, rosy face had turned pale, the freshly healed wound on his face burned, a red scar upon his cheek. His very hair appeared to stand on end as he heard the voice of the Huguenot.

"Mordi," he growled and put his hand on his sword just as Marguerite and La Mole appeared, arm in arm, face to face.

Immediately he glimpsed Coconnas, La Mole threw up his head, his sword instantly in his hand.

Marguerite clutched his arm: "Have you gone mad?"

"Gentlemen, remember where you are," cried Henrietta, boldly placing herself before the tall figure that dwarfed her.

Coconnas relaxed and put away his sword: La Mole did likewise.

"I vow I never saw a gamer pair," cried Marguerite: "But listen. Enough blood has been spilt. Will you two remember you are in the presence of your saviours and renounce any thought of vengeance for the past?"

Neither spoke. Marguerite stamped her foot.

"*Mon Dieu!* Come, Henrietta, we will return and leave these hot-heads to cut each other's throats."

She picked up her cloak and instantly both men fell penitent.

"Madame," said Coconnas, "I am at fault. Your gracious pardon."

He knelt in abasement before her.

"Come here, Henrietta; it is you to whom he must kneel." Laughingly the two women changed places and La Mole fell to kissing the hands of his beloved. He was powerfully affected; Marguerite, as yet, mistress of herself but misty eyed.

As for the other two, they embraced heartily, then Henrietta drew her cavalier over to La Mole.

"Your hands, please. Now swear to be friends in our honour, staunch and true till death do you part."

The men's hands gripped, clasped for a moment, and were raised.

"I swear," they said simultaneously, and with a cry of pleasure Henrietta rang the bell. Masks were adjusted and orders given to the attendant who appeared.

Marguerite was solemn for a moment, then she too threw off sad reflection and entered into the spirit of the night.

Supper was a joyous meal ; the chef an artist, the wine perfect.

Heads, already heated with passion, burned with fiery golden wine ; and 'ere long the attendant was dismissed.

The four separated, each pair taking refuge in a different apartment of the suite, after agreeing to keep awake and meet in an hour. The discreet retiring apartment in which Marguerite and La Mole found themselves, was furnished in the richest Persian. A luxurious divan of the low, upholstered type, covered with a satin quilt and piled high with soft cushions, invited to the pleasures of love.

La Mole kept the Queen in view, Marguerite desired to be but a woman.

Yet, so short had been her excursions into love's highways and byways, she was foreign to the arts and devices of the *cocotte*.

Her very nature made it imperative that she be loved : stirred to the depths by her love for De Guise, she had suddenly been left unfed, literally starving for love's tender and beautiful affection. She had chosen La Mole for his gentlemanly qualities, but most of all because of the sweet regard he bore her. She believed that together they might find spiritual and physical harmony, not merely descend into the intricacies of a vile and sordid intrigue.

What many of the Court mistook for a phase of love—the deliberate and disgusting pandering to animal instincts, she abhorred. Love must be beautiful, or it could not and should not be indulged.

Similarly thought La Mole. A man who had

conserved his body as he reserved his speech, he was filled with the tender and romantic passion that falls to the chosen few.

He worshipped Marguerite as at a shrine and not one word would he say, not a thing would he do, to desecrate it.

He paused by the door, drinking in the beauty of Marguerite as she sat down. With a languid movement she removed the mask.

"Lock the door."

He obeyed.

"Come here."

He approached, like a sleep-walker, and knelt at her knee, his head bowed.

"Poor boy," she whispered, and fondled his hair with her hand, then drew his head to her bosom.

Instinctively his arms went about her. Her eyes, brilliant as stars, closed; their heavy lids fringing her cheek. Her mouth half opened as delicious tremors thrilled her shaking form: she unconsciously sighed.

'Ere she knew it, her head fell back and lips fastened upon her own, drinking her very soul. She sank back, limp; her body one burning ache, his to do with as he would.

"Oh, my love," crooned La Mole. "My beautiful Queen. Forgive me, I am unworthy to touch you."

He laid his cheek to her own; she caressed it softly with her mouth, until he turned and again took the lips she yielded happily.

A wonderful exhilaration seized him.

"*Mon Dieu*, how I love you!" he exclaimed, and took her fiercely into his arms, crushing her against him, his body like steel. She seemed to curve and

envelop him as they sank deep amid the cushions and time stood still.

Suddenly, a knock at the door roused them as from the borderland of sleep. La Mole started up and looked toward the door. The happy laughter of the other pair came faintly to his ears, then Marguerite spoke.

"What time is it? Surely not——"

"I fear so. Come, let me help you." He took her hand and assisted her to her feet, looking into her eyes as he did so.

"Happy?" She nodded, smiling. "No regrets?"

"None. Oh, my dear, I thank you. You sweet thing." She threw both her arms about his neck, kissed him lightly, then turning, picked up her cloak. He helped her adjust it and replace the mask, and as calmly as if they had been for a stroll, they joined the others.

At the foot of the stairs the party paused: the two women said "Adieu," each blew a kiss to the cavaliers and were gone. At the end of the road the litter of the Duchess awaited.

"My dear," exclaimed Henrietta as they arranged themselves comfortably in the interior: "how perfectly marvellous. Beyond my wildest expectations, I assure you."

"Indeed," said her friend, laughing. "Shall we wager as to who had the most divine lover?"

"Seriously, the man's a machine."

"I am tired," said Marguerite. "Do you mind if I don't talk?"

Henrietta took her hand and pressed it, and Marguerite sank back and let her mind re-live those precious moments. This was love, surely? Yet, she had loved her cousin, though very differently. *Then*

it had been pain, something outside her own volition ; this was happiness and she took it deliberately.

Wrong, yes, but did not all the poets chant of love : did not doctors elevate nature above ideals ? What could stem the life-tide, rising and falling within the human heart ?

Was it not greed to withhold one's treasure ; was it not blessed to give ?

Who would stay water to the thirsty, who deny love to the love-starved ?

She could not, in honesty, regret : too often, since she lost Henry as the ministrator to her needs, she had known the pain of a hard inholding, that set her head athrobing and her eyes aweeping ! Her heart opened to La Mole, *he* would never turn her love back upon itself nor leave her to suffer because of an imagined slight, as De Guise had done.

He had hoped to bring her to her knees, thereby ; but instead, she had the courage to change her lover rather than be made a chattel and a convenience. Further, Henry had been the one to wrong her ; La Mole crowned her.

Wrapped by rosy dreams, her happy mind yet supplicating God for understanding and forgiveness, she reached the Louvre, bade her friend a hurried good night and went straightway to bed.

No chattering tongue would be allowed to dispel the sacred memories of that one undiluted hour of bliss.

CHAPTER XII

LOVE'S PAY DAY

NEEDLESS to say, Henry of Navarre and Charlotte had lost themselves in the same sweet highways at precisely the same time, likewise De Guise and his lady. That night saw, also, the well-hidden desires of D'Alençon come to light. Charles and Navarre were so inseparable as to give him cause to fear the latter would turn Catholic. He therefore discussed the advisability of himself openly embracing Protestantism and usurping Navarre's kingship with De Mouy, who listened attentively to his suggestions. For himself, he knew he never would or could invest D'Alençon with the qualities of Henry ; this self-seeker knew no scruple and no law. De Mouy made up his mind that should this improbability occur he would disassociate himself with the affair, complete his design of killing Maureval, whom he knew was only wounded, and retire. He hated this dastardly murderer of his father, Sieur de Mouy, whose tragic death had hurt and infuriated the Huguenots prior to the Massacre ; and it was to be his pleasure 'ere long to rob Catherine of her callous captain.

Promising to consider putting the proposition to the remaining chiefs of the party, mostly those who had chosen discretion to going to Paris in reply to Catherine's honeyed invitation, De Mouy determined to put the proposition to Henry.

D'Alençon had been abroad in the City with a party of wild young nobles and, noticing the waiting litter of the Duchess, had scouted about until she returned. He espied the Duchess and Marguerite in the dimly lit vestibule of a notorious house with two cavaliers, one of whom he saw, with a start, was La Mole. Turning over in his mind his prospects of making use of this knowledge, much as his mother cogitated, he thought he saw a bulwark against his discovery in Huguenot plotting, in the shape of Marguerite.

He could force her to uphold him in anything by the threat of disclosure to the King.

La Mole's life, like De Mouy's and other existing Huguenots, was spared only for the time being with any certainty, but if La Mole was valuable to Marguerite he was a pawn in the game of D'Alençon.

Charles, supposed to be suffering from a feverish chill, had stayed in bed reading his beloved treatise, with the result that he became worse and passed a fearful night.

The following morning, answer to a knock on Henry of Navarre's door disclosed De Mouy. Henry was alone, La Mole out arranging a lodging in the town. De Mouy was invited inside.

"Sire," he said. "I reflect that it is now time to act. D'Alençon aids us only because he desires your place as leader. He believes you are turned Catholic. Come away and prove him wrong."

Henry uneasily bit his lip. "I am listening," he said.

"Is it true Your Majesty forsakes the Protestant religion?"

"My good De Mouy, God preserved my life and

since He saw fit to allow the almost extinction of Protestants, I may take it He desires Catholicity."

"Sire, would you abjure merely because Charles gives you your life?"

"I am a Catholic."

"Also, Sire, a betrayer. We who followed you before, cannot now do so. I must tell the others that the King of Navarre turns coat and holds out hands to the enemy, becomes the son of a dastardly mother."

"Silence, Sire. Give up politics as I do, and ensure a head on your shoulders. Adieu." Only a finger on lip warned De Mouy he spoke thus because he was overheard.

Henry almost pushed outside the young De Mouy, who detected the form of D'Alençon darting down the corridor. "Spy," he said, viciously. Turning away, he made his way outside, understanding that Henry's wary policy had dictated his words and indicated what he was far from likely to do.

Thus, when days passed by and D'Alençon could obtain nothing definite from the Huguenot party regarding being proclaimed head in Henry's place, he concluded it was Marguerite he had to fight against. He appealed to Marguerite to counteract any suggestion of the Huguenots clinging to Henry and asked her to bring force to bear upon the King of Navarre, De Mouy and La Mole, to help her brother, if she wished to preserve her reputation.

"What do you mean, my reputation?"

"Only the Rue St. Antoine."

With a shock, she realized he knew. "Would you use such knowledge against your own sister?"

"Now is not the time to bandy words or throw away any advantage. Will you do as I ask, persuade

your husband to have Monsieur de Mouy appoint me as King of the Huguenots in his place ? ”

Marguerite was in a quandary. She did not desire that her husband should throw over the certainty of the Throne of Navarre for the doubtful gain of a new religion. She held that conscience must direct religion, but that where estate so high figured it must take precedence. Moreover, this represented no change in her husband's religion, he kept his life in return for Charles' own and with any luck could keep religion as well, with an assured Throne for himself and his wife.

D'Alençon was going against his mother, who wished Henry's Protestantism to be the block on which his head should fall: thus, between two stones, the young Prince was in process of being crushed. Marguerite, much as she hated it, had to promise to aid her brother, ignorant that this was to cost her her happiness.

Thus days, weeks and months went by, and all struggled in the turmoil of existence.

Navarre rightly considered that ambition made D'Alençon his own safeguard, for, pledged to Protestantism, how could the Prince be other than a guarantee: so he sat back and let events ride—very pleasantly on the whole. The pastime of jousting was much indulged in, the lists being opposite the Tuileries in the Place de Carrousel, and here, facing a company brilliant for fair women and gorgeous apparel that was seated upon silk-covered steps and amphitheatres, the contestants would spur madly to the charge with lances poised, seated upon richly caparisoned horses of magnificent stature and spirit.

When tired of this form of amusement, the Court

set itself to devise new ones ; hours were spent at the chase, in gondolas upon the lake, in dancing and pleasantly flitting amid the trees. They were like children who, after a bad nightmare, laugh away the golden hours—then sleep, dreamlessly.

When tired with amusement above ground, they descended into the subterranean caves of the old building or wandered in the picture gallery, deciding upon costumes to be worn in representation of the original for the evening's masque. The Louvre resounded to laughter, that so recently had reflected screams of terror ; and the past was forgotten.

Catherine now threw a bombshell. Convinced of the duplicity of her daughter, Marguerite, and of the unreliability of Charlotte, she looked round for one on whom to vent her rage.

Rene's paste had failed her like everything else, but she would show them all she could still retaliate, still cause havoc among the Huguenots. She accused De Mouy as the Huguenot who had almost robbed her of her indispensable Captain Maureval, who had spoken and declared it was not Henry of Navarre who had injured him, but De Mouy ; who, being in Navarre's room, must have been there to conspire with him.

Catherine in a curt note, ordered her son forthwith to produce the offender, holding D'Alençon responsible for him ; and set the young man in a state bordering upon frenzy.

He repaired to Henry of Navarre's rooms.

The King was alone, La Mole spending with Marguerite what proved to be almost the last heavenly hours of the two. He explained to Henry that, in the belief that Navarre despised the Kingdom of Navarre, he himself had aspired to it. Henry's



A GARDEN IETE AT THE CHÂTEAU OF ANLT

face remained bland and uncommunicative as he listened. Swiftly his face changed, however, as D'Alençon informed him that Catherine had uncovered Maureval's assailant and demanded his head. The young prince distractedly cried, "I don't know what to do."

"Let us discuss the matter. Do you realize that if De Mouy is taken and made to speak, he will convict you as well as myself?"

"I fear so. Cannot we do something? At this juncture we do not want the searchlight of inquiry directed upon us. Surely De Mouy is sufficiently valuable to you to warrant an effort to keep him out of this."

"True, but who can be made the scapegoat?"

After a moment, a smile lit up the face of D'Alençon. "La Mole! He cannot endanger either of us and he is of no great value."

Henry weighed this up.

"Why not. It would save the situation. All Catherine wants is Maureval's would-be assassin. But how can we trick Maureval?"

"I have it. La Mole has a cloak of the same bright red shade as De Mouy. In the dim light of your room, Maureval recognized the famous cloak, rather than the man. Now, if we can force La Mole to confess that he was inside it on the fatal night——"

"He was wounded prior to that."

"But 'twill serve!"

"Yes. No one but Marguerite and I knew of this. Mere scratches they were, anyway."

Henry thus considered. La Mole would be the saving of them all at this critical stage: and surely he would not object to incurring what small risk lay in the charge of resisting arrest?

Henry gave D'Alençon his word it should be done. He would ask La Mole to take the risk confession involved: then try and save him from the consequences.

D'Alençon considered he would be saved thereby and his plans remain unhampered. Even if La Mole died, well then, it would prevent him ever boasting of his conquest.

That night he proposed the scheme to Marguerite.

"My sister, I must hold you to your promise to aid me."

"Oh. Tell me, how."

"Maureval's assailant, De Mouy, is uncovered and demanded to suffer, but this will involve both your husband—in whose rooms Maureval was injured—and myself, who harbour him. Navarre and I propose that La Mole confesses himself the culprit to save us all. We require you to persuade him to take the weight of Catherine's anger."

Marguerite turned pale as thus D'Alençon explained the position.

"*Mon Dieu*. I cannot do it."

"You must. You shall. What is the risk to his life compared to mine and your husband's? Think."

"I have thought. How can I expose an innocent man to the risk?"

"Why, the risk is trifling. Henry won't let the worst befall. Consider. The charge is small, but if De Mouy were charged the whole structure of Protestantism is imperilled. La Mole imperils no one, not even himself."

"And if I won't?"

"My sister, he is in greater peril as your lover."

This was but the truth, and eventually—while La Mole dreamed rosy dreams—Marguerite gave her

word to expose him to risk. She had to promise to forswear her happiness and his life if need be, at the greater need of her husband and his cause. As her brother said, La Mole alive or dead, compromised no one ; his being in the service of Henry made it feasible it was he and no other who put up such an excellent and bloody resistance to arrest, and brought himself within the scope of Catherine's vengeance.

Faced with all the facts, La Mole willingly offered his life to the needs of his fair mistress.

A queen, she believed herself able to save him, and in face of greater issues at stake she but loved him the more for his acquiescence. It was arranged he should write a note to Henry of Navarre, stating he himself had wounded Maureval and wondering how De Mouy came to be blamed.

This, dropped in the corridor, would turn Catherine's attention to La Mole.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CARDS ARE RE-SHUFFLED

TIME, eternal and serene, pursued his course. The King, feeling the need for fresh air, had ordered a hawking party ; thus, early one morning, the courtyard resounded to the excitement of the party, including Henry of Navarre and his wife, La Mole and De Mouy. De Guise, to hide his hurt, kept behind amidst a beautiful group of Court ladies.

Charles found difficulty in rising at the early hour of five o'clock, but in his determination to cast off his feverish depression, he brought to bear what will-power he possessed and achieved his objective.

The precious book of *vénérerie* lay upon a chair in the armoury and Charles, noting it as he passed, thought pleasantly of the happy hours he had spent reading it and of the others in store.

The cavalcade rode leisurely and about two hours later reached the forest of Saint Germain proper.

Named Silva Lida, this verdant mantle, crowned by the majestic old château, affords every variety of the chase : and the King, supported more by stoicism than strength and with his favourite falcon, hooded, perched upon his gloved fist, reflected on the beauties of nature. How glorious the sun, rising behind the towers of the castle, adding splendour to one of man's triumphs set amid those of nature.

A tear trembled in his haggard eye. The grooms,

encouraging the terriers to beat among the reeds near the foaming fringe of the river, seemed weighted by their heavy boots, the brilliant company's animation suspended to his sight.

The whole sky seemed to weigh upon the King and every note jarred upon his nerves : the flight of a convoy of heron, as it rose, pained his vision and it was with difficulty he retained his seat.

"Haw, haw," cried the company.

"Ho-la-la-Leup," cried Charles and whipped off the leathern hood over the eyes of his bird ; which described an ark as it accustomed its eyes to the light, then swept its powerful wings in flight after the prey. Charles thrilled to the sheer beauty of its line as, like a fleeting shadow straight as an arrow, the hawk cut across the line of the startled convoy.

A sharp and menacing cry fluttered down from the sky as the hawk attacked a solitary bird from above : a few plaintive notes and the heron descended, wings closed in the effort to escape. The hawk closed his wings similarly, and, like a plume, dropped on its prey : a sudden cloud of feathers drifted upon the wind and there rang out his victorious cry as both came to earth.

Charles spurred his horse. "To the falcon," he cried and rode away, the scattered members of the party following. The spot was half a mile distant and the falcon, after picking the brains of the heron, had already been secured by a groom, who quietly advanced and took hold of the trailing jesses.

He drew the falcon toward him by shortening them and, as Charles rode up and met the glittering eyes of the bird, he quickly hooded it once more. This particular bird was very expert : wild and fierce enough to attack a tiger, he yet was tame and never

known to sulk or fool his master. Charles loved these characteristics in the bird as greatly as he admired them in man, and of the two the bird found him the better ruler.

All the other birds were now loosed after game : and soon, with the victims heavy in the arms of the grooms, the cavalcade was ready to return.

De Guise, bitter in the loss of Marguerite and blaming Navarre for it, took an opportunity, while the attention of the others was taken, to nudge his arm. As Navarre looked interrogatively at him, the Duke whispered, " Follow me," and sent his horse into a leafy lane screened from view by the thick foliage.

As soon as Navarre joined him he leaned over and gave him a hearty clip across the cheek with his riding glove and Navarre paled with anger. A red weal marred his face and glowed as he dismounted and drew his sword, waiting for his adversary to do likewise.

A few moments and both were engaged, a test between experts for the love of a woman. A minor wound drew blood from the wrist of Navarre and in a moment he blooded De Guise in the ear. Perspiration poured from both and they knew it might be hours before the crisis arrived.

Suddenly, swift as a bird, Marguerite appeared. She had watched the secret departure and guessed what was afoot, and deliberately she drove her horse between them. Both put up their swords and, dismounting, she drew De Guise aside.

" Oh, Henry, why cannot you let me go peaceably ? "

He gazed earnestly at her. " Swear to me you want so to go."

"My dear, I have loved you : I love you yet, but differently. I do not know my husband, but my path in life lies with him. Let me go."

De Guise bent and kissed her hand.

"God knows I have suffered for my mad folly in so treating you, my dear : and now it is too late."

"Cease to repine, Henry. I would have failed you in time, as you failed me. Most couples fail each other at some time : and we could not expect to go on always."

"The fault was mine. I should not have wed any other but you. Oh, why cannot we go back ?"

"Nay, Henry. Look forward, as I do, to a happy future. The cage of faithful wedlock was not for you. Why, you are like a snared eagle, pining for the sky : and do not tell me I am the *only* woman in your life."

"I cannot, will not, lie to you, Marguerite. There have been others, but only because I lost the comfort of your love."

"I know how easy it is to fall, dear Henry," she murmured. "I, too, have fallen."

"God forgive me, what have I done to you ?" he exclaimed, passionately.

"If you will do as I ask, forget, Henry. In the arms of other women fairer and kinder than I, you will seek and find recompense. And so, farewell !"

She held out both hands and he took them. "One more smile," she urged, and he smiled broadly to hide his pain.

"I am all right. Go, Marguerite. God prosper you."

He kissed the tips of her fingers, saluted both her and her husband, mounted and joined the others, and his gay laugh rang out as though he had never a care in the world. Henry aided Marguerite to mount

and himself mounted, and slowly they joined the others and rode home in silence.

Charles fell when he dismounted in the courtyard. Fiery pains burned him and he swayed as he was helped to his feet.

La Mole and De Mouy, after discussing and deciding against a sudden flight, stood near Henry of Navarre and D'Alençon as they supported the King.

From a window the pale, still face of Catherine noted the tableau, and she started. Supposing Charles were really ill? What if he should die and the Huguenots still alive: and, worst of all, her loved son, Henry of Anjou, away in Poland! She determined to send word to her favourite and proceed on to an immediate conclusion to her plans. Word was dispatched for M. de Nancey to arrest La Mole, the culprit, as she now believed, whom she saw riding away to the La Belle, where he was once again lodged. De Mouy and Henry of Navarre would be next, she reflected: and made her way to the King.

He had vomited blood and was being put to bed, while Navarre and D'Alençon uneasily awaited some word as to his condition from Madelon. When Catherine appeared, the two took their leave and she proceeded to the bedroom of her son.

He was like a maniac. The first sight that greeted his eye on his return had been the ruins of his favourite book. One of the hounds had been left in the room, Acton, and, evidently, had taken the liberty of mauling it. White with passion, Charles swore to flay him, but repeated calls for the animal failed to locate him and he searched the room in a daze of anger, finally locating Acton underneath a wardrobe. He was not in hiding, he was dead; and

in the crevices of his foam-spattered teeth were plainly to be seen particles of paper of a greenish hue.

Charles gazed upon the dog and shivered. At last he knew : the book was poisoned and he himself thereby. He went alternately hot and cold. The book had been in the room of Navarre, placed by an unknown hand. With a certainty born of use he unerringly marked the hand as Catherine's.

A flow of abjective abuse shocked his nurse. Charles was insane, she cried in her heart ; and, as Catherine appeared, she approached her.

" Oh, Madame, what shall I do? What has happened to the King? " Charles stood rocking, his eye, full of deadly hate, directed upon his mother, a dew upon his forehead.

" My son, calm yourself. Tell your mother what is amiss."

Charles laughed hysterically, tears rolling down his lined face : then he stopped. " I will show you, Madame." Drawing himself up to his full height, he beckoned her to his side.

There at his feet lay his favourite dog, in all the clumsiness of sudden death.

Catherine bent over him. " Hum, dead," she muttered. " Well, what has this to do with you, my son. I can replace your dog, indeed it will be my pleasure to procure a finer one."

Charles pointed and as she straightened herself, Catherine felt a sudden shock. She recognized the book and her active brain associated the facts.

" How came that here? "

" Why, Madame, my mother, I brought it. Some kind person presented it to my brother-in-law and I took a King's privilege of robbing him of it."

"But, Charles, tell me, *you* have not read it," cried Catherine, her eyes staring, her face pale.

"Indeed, I have, madame," replied Charles, sardonically; "and very thoroughly, believe me." Catherine rapidly reflected. Charles was doomed. Should she acknowledge it or pretend ignorance. She decided on the latter.

"Still I do not see reason for your passion." Charles knew her now as the incarnation of deceit: his mother, knowing him dying by her own act, shewed not a tithe of concern in obedience to the need for self-preservation.

He drew himself up, eyes flashing,—a corpse lit by a terrible flame. "My God, woman. Is there no spark of humanity within you? You see me, the child of your womb, distracted by your intrigue, blooded by your jealousies and dying by your hand. Yes," he thundered, as his mother cried out, "by your hand, Madame. God forgive you, for I never can." His eyes closed and he sank to the floor, blood upon his chin.

The thud brought back animation to the two women. Madelon cried out sharply and ran to his side, after pulling a bell cord to summon aid, pillowing the King's sagging head upon her knees while her tears fell unheeded upon his upturned face. Like a statue carved in pale marble, Catherine stood, transfixed. Her brain, incapable of transmitting the full horror of what she had done, seemed icebound.

The terrible shock had unnerved her and for the moment she was mute.

Aid forthcoming, she recovered her self-possession. Charles was put to bed and Rene sent for to counteract the poison. Doctors, hastily summoned from the town, arrived—armed with all the leeches at their

disposal, and soon the apartments reeked like a hospital.

Meanwhile, La Mole was lodged in prison. Marguerite planned with Henrietta and Coconnas to rescue him and Henry, after discussing the situation with De Mouy, prepared to fly with his followers before Catherine made sure of his head.

Once Charles were dead, she would strike at Navarre, to prevent her beloved son, Henry, being submitted to the dangers his presence represented.

Charles was not yet despaired of, thus a few safe days intervened; but Navarre, certain of the unerring accuracy of all his uncanny instincts, knew he ought to prepare. Thus, that night with Charlotte was in the nature of a farewell.

The Baroness, her desire to have her lover think well of her superseding her grief, was calm. She gave Henry the height of spiritual and physical love in those last, never-to-be-forgotten hours: then, as he lay contented, told him of her life.

How pitiful it was! Her early ideals, than which none could have been higher, had been so heavily assailed in marriage as to unbalance her. Unhappiness, spreading and choking all the happy ways of the maid, had turned life into a seething turmoil of bitterness and pain.

Like a bird, long caged, she had snatched at freedom through Catherine and found herself bound on the wheel—in process of being broken.

Her shattered nerves—stimulated by the shock of realizing whither she had been led, steadied in the endeavour to ward off so grim a fate: and gradually reasoning returned and courage asserted itself.

Then, by deliberate choice, she had remained at Court sooner than be a doormat for one man.

At least she had life ; a certain freedom of action, power and plenty : and was not dependent on the varying moods of a man of an older generation—the husband who neither understood nor had compassion for her.

She knew he did not love her, only himself. He thought only of how she had escaped him and, like a fowler who moves in the night, still sought to trap her unawares. While Catherine protected her, and, indeed, made it possible for her to evade him, her husband nursed his jealous, thwarted anger, waiting his chance. Charlotte swore to Henry she loved only him and ever would, and at last, her confession and self-vindication over, showed the pitying man to the door.

Their affair was over and both were the more human and understanding for it.

Catherine, in her own room, suffered excruciating sorrow. Sorrow for Charles, for herself. She knew herself for what she was and, throwing herself upon her knees, she earnestly prayed for light. She reflected upon all the hurts that had set her upon the wicked path she had trodden so long : upon the forces that had engineered the first step and kept her rigidly on the downward path ever since.

Ambition had led to murder, but she had received as a reward a cross, carried unceasingly through the years. Her soul, tired of straining backward and upward, had been swept by suppressed and baulked natural outlet into darker, more dreadful depths. The vital energy, growing in force upon destroying force, had turned her brain and drawn her into scheming intrigues as an only means of outlet. She had found, thereby, what took her mind off the crucial need ; and gradually this latter slipped into

oblivion and she was the spirit of uneasy and unhappy energy.

All her faculties, abnormally used, became abnormal: the poison of the hurt she suffered and the fear of conscience, combined to make her a mechanical schemer. Once she ceased to be this, she would crumple up; and she knew it.

Emotions long dead would arise, ghost-like, from the tomb to which she had so long ago confined them, and overwhelm her with the regret and pain of burial.

She would be swept with a destroying force and *must* go on, lest they catch her up. Poor, misguided woman; product of her time, she now wept in an agony of grief, her hold over herself for the moment relaxed. Word was brought her every hour as to the progress of the King: and she prepared her defence. Should Charles die, his death must be said to be due to magic.

She remembered the token she had taken from the room of Marguerite—a wax figure of a cavalier.

This could be said to represent Charles, and with her usual thoroughness she took it from the secret drawer in her bureau and hid it in her cloak, and hurriedly left the room and made her way to the La Belle, attended by M. de Nancey.

Giordano, startled by her sudden and unexpected appearance, bowed low.

“Which room was occupied by Monsieur La Mole?” she demanded. The host hastened to show her the way and remained at the door with the Captain.

“Is everything as it was?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Even the remains of his last meal. We shall make money by exhibiting it.”

A bag stood, half open, upon a chair beside the bed.

"What is in this?"

"Indeed, Madame, I could not say. I received strict instructions not to touch anything."

"Correct," said De Nancey.

Catherine placed her hand within the bag and dropped therein the little model.

Picking up the bag she carried it to the table and emptied it thereon. A few articles of intimate wear and of the toilet fell out, and prominently to the fore was the little figure.

Giordano started, M. de Nancey exclaimed, as Catherine deliberately picked it up.

"I thought so! Small wonder the King lies at death's door. See, his likeness, on which magic has been practised. A needle pierces the heart." All stared at the object. None knew better than Catherine that this was indicative of love assailing and piercing the heart of the beloved.

Again she spoke. "This magic, especially to those who, like the King, have great faith in the practices of the Cabala and magic generally, has the power of vengeance—even from a distance. The scoundrelly Huguenot, not daring to openly attack the King as he attacked Maureval, has thus conspired against him. You bear witness to the finding of this." She held up the figure before the credulous eyes of the onlookers, placed it in her cloak, then proceeded back to her apartment, where she wrote a letter to the Procureur General Laquesle, accusing the prisoner, La Mole, of sacrilege against the Majesty of the King; enclosing the wax figure and drawing attention to the blow, intended for the King, in its heart.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DECREE OF FATE

LA MOLE, by the aid of bribes paid by Coconnas to the grim executioner friend of Maureval, was lodged in a ground-floor dungeon with an outer wall.

His friends intended to rescue him, the proposed means being a tunnel dug from the outside of the wall to underneath his chamber.

Even while willing, well-paid workers perspired over the work, La Mole was brought before his accusers, fortified by a note from Marguerite ; which read, " Be of good courage, we move."

No signature was required : La Mole kissed the billet and tore it into tiny fragments, which he scattered in dark corners as he accompanied the halberdier to the interrogatory chamber, dreaming of other modes of rescue and escape upon a swift horse into fair Lorraine. A low, arched doorway was flung open and La Mole saw a dozen sinister, black-robed figures—the judges—seated. La Mole was brought to a standstill before them.

" Your name," inquired the president.

" The Count Joseph Boniface de Lerac de La Mole."

" Your age ? "

" Twenty-three years and three months."

" What do you know of the illness of His Majesty the King ? "

" I know nothing of it."

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

"You mean to tell us you are unaware of it?"

"Oh no——"

"Ha, you are aware of it, Sir. Why? Because you engineered it."

"Indeed, no. I have noticed the King has been unwell of late."

"And you know nothing of the cause?"

"Nothing, truly."

"Be good enough to tell us what you know concerning a wax figure."

"A wax figure." La Mole's face wore a puzzled expression. "Nothing, Sir."

"Do you deny you recognize this?" The voice of the president thundered through the room: he held aloft the wax figure: his threatening eye triumphantly fixed upon his prisoner.

"I do deny it." La Mole was pale. Whither was the inquiry leading?

"Then, Sir, kindly tell us how it came to be in your room."

"Impossible." La Mole looked wildly about. The trap was deeper than he had dreamed. "Gentlemen, I am here as the self-accused assailant of the Captain of Musketeers. I fail to follow the trend of your inquiries."

"We will enlighten you," said the suave voice. "This figure" — holding it dramatically aloft — "represents the King. By the mystic arts of magic you have conspired against his sacred life, with the result he dies. Speak your justification, 'ere we tear it from you."

"I know nothing whatever about it. I never saw the figure before."

"So, then you cannot tell us what means this letter 'M' embroidered upon the robe?"

A terrible thought occurred to La Mole. "M" might indicate Marguerite. How came she to be mixed up in the affair. Had she been to his room and herself placed therein this waxen figure as a love token? At all costs he must close the line of inquiry, lest she be dragged into the pitiless net of the law. He visualized the figure of his beloved slipping into the hotel and inquiring for his room. Directed by the host, she would trip daintily up the staircase, enter his room, and after a swift, loving look around, lay down her love message upon the pillow.

With a start he brought his wandering mind back to the present. The faces of his judges were stamped upon his inward vision with intense clarity 'ere he spoke. "Gentlemen, I refuse to say anything." This, he thought, would lead them to the belief he was guilty and delay matters.

The president rose and waved his hand. At once halberdiers closed in and he was escorted back to his cell, deep in agitated thought.

Marguerite! He must save her at all costs: even with his life. Please God she and their good friends would not delay their rescue of him, for the place unnerved him. For an hour he paced up and down like a caged tiger, a prey to anxiety: then he was again removed. This time he was taken to another part of the prison. A tapestry thrown back, revealed the torture chamber in all its horror and La Mole instinctively drew back.

A burly hand, placed in the small of his back, pushed him forward and a terrible fear stabbed him as he saw the gross, inhuman jailer, Caboche, in the light of the brazier. A voice spoke.

"Kneel and hear your sentence." Rough hands forced the trembling knees to bend; La Mole kneeled.

"The Count de La Mole is accused and judged guilty of the crime of high treason, of sacrilege against the person of the King by means of a miniature likeness bearing the letter 'M,' meaning *Mort*—Death."

La Mole shook his head, looking for the person who spoke.

"In consequence, the said La Mole shall be taken to the Place Saint-Jean-en-Grève, there to be decapitated; and a plate inscribed with his crime and punishment publicly shown."

"This is infamous," said La Mole, springing to his feet.

"Silence." The huge executioner now approached and seized the young man, whose legs and arms were swiftly bound. The voice continued. "Will you confess your accomplices?"

"I tell you I am——" He paused, afraid to declare his innocence lest hurt befall Marguerite.

"Will you confess?"

"Never!" Behind the curtained doorway stood the interrogator. In his hand he held a note received along with the King's order for execution, from Catherine; saying: "If the prisoner refuses to speak, put him to torture." La Mole was put to the torture by water, which he bore quietly, then tied to the rack.

Caboche now placed two planks between La Mole's legs and two on the outside and bound them together tightly with a cord. La Mole believed that he would not suffer, that the bribes his beloved would pay through Coconnas would ensure leather wedges

being used and that he would be called upon to pretend a pain he did not feel.

He was ignorant of the ties that bound Caboche and Maureval; sweet ties, when the executioner was so fearfully avoided by every one else and such that he had played false to Coconnas with hate in his heart for his friend's injury. Caboche smiled grimly as he reflected, while gazing upon the man helpless in his power.

A wedge was introduced, Caboche raised the heavy mallet and struck a tremendous blow. The bone cracked with the noise of a pistol discharging and La Mole groaned, his shuddering voice trailing away into silence.

"Will you confess?"

"I have nothing to confess," said La Mole, faintly.

"Second wedge."

It was handed over and introduced. The sweat rose in balls of moisture on the brow of La Mole. God help him, what was he to do? What but bear it! Another blow and the broken bone pierced the flesh.

"Ah." The shuddering cry rang out. Again it was repeated and with a terrible scream La Mole lost consciousness. "To the Chapel," said the voice; and the still, limp form was borne away on a litter, a melancholy procession.

CHAPTER XV

FOR LOVE OF A WOMAN

IN the darkness of the April night, La Mole returned to life and looked about him. His limbs, benumbed by the chilly stone flags upon which he lay, seemed missing. A shaft of moonlight penetrated the stained-glass windows, outlining the figures of the saints therein in a shaft of silver. It fell upon the pale, despairing face of La Mole, his eyes tragic pools as he viewed the vacant scene.

"*Mon Dieu*," he moaned; "Where am I?" Stiffly he essayed to rise and with a cry sank back. He had forgotten his leg. He rolled over and crawled out of the light, his leg dragging painfully behind him. In the darkness his eyes accustomed themselves and he saw he was in a chapel.

"Dear Heaven. So soon. Can this be my last night on earth? God forbid." Weak tears rolled down his face. He saw his friends awaiting him at the outer wall, while he was far removed—spending his last hours in the distant chapel.

He visualized the dismay of Marguerite when, the digging accomplished and taps sounding beneath his chosen dungeon, the prisoner made no response. He saw Coconnas, lustily digging to clear his friend's path to freedom and his heart nearly broke. Alone, crippled, in dastardly hands, what could he do?

He bowed his handsome face to the earth and wept: the chilly stones caressed his brow and he

prayed as never before. God help him ; he could not, would not, pass out without a farewell to his beloved ! But supposing he wrote and it reached alien hands ? Ah, that would never do. He must remain mute, take his terrible punishment for a crime of which he was not guilty. He sank motionless to the floor ; awaiting the passing of the hours made awful by the pain of his wounds : and paid no attention when a priest entered and began to chant.

At six o'clock, he was carried out and placed on straw in a tumbril, which slowly left Vincennes, crossed the Rue Saint-Antoine and entered the Place Saint-Jean-en-Grève. A dense and eager crowd pressed close to view the man who was going unconfessed to destruction and, from the foul interior, La Mole painfully searched for a sign of his friends. Tears stood in his eyes ; his haggard face, pitiful in its renunciation, would have moved a heart of stone : but the stupid mob saw none of the pathos written on it.

" How handsome he is," murmured a few ; " how pale he looks," some others.

The tumbril stopped. A buzzing sound filled the ears of La Mole as he was lifted out and carried on to the scaffold. The indignity at being unable to walk greatly added to his grief. Thank God it would soon be over ; but oh, the horror of dying alone, his beloved even now awaiting him. Suddenly a commotion was heard, a murmur like the sound of an angry sea disturbed the surging mob. Raising his drooping head, La Mole saw a tall figure fighting to reach him. His heart gave a bound and then seemed to stop as he recognized the thatch of disordered red hair, the blazing, distracted eyes of Coconnas. With a bound he reached La Mole, dropped to one knee

and supported his friend : holding him close in pity and affection while the crowd roared for the head of Coconnas—Huguenots hating him for his cruelty during the Massacre and Catholics despising him for it. A heavenly sweetness stole into the heart of La Mole. Heaven had sent his friend ; Marguerite and Henrietta could not be far away. “ My poor friend, what have they done to you.” La Mole pointed to his leg. “ Where is she ? ” he said.

“ At the window, facing you. We came as soon as we heard. Have you anything to tell me ? ”

“ There is no time, but I thank you for coming. I die to save her I love.” His eyes strove to reach that fair face, but all he saw was a handkerchief, waving.

“ You must go,” he said faintly. “ Tell her I die gladly, because she blessed me with her love.”

“ She knows all, my friend : and my place is here with you.” Coconnas jumped to his feet and faced the mob.

“ I am the guilty one,” he shouted. A cry arose. The officers and headsman spoke quickly and he was seized. La Mole, in the arms of the executioner, clasped his hands and a moment later, after kissing his hand to the window, his head fell.

A priest approached Coconnas. “ My son, do you know what you do ? ”

“ Yes, father, I must die with him. Only thus can I fulfil my vow.” He knelt, a sublime look upon his face : then his head, too, rolled away and came to rest beside that of his friend—whom, in death, he was not parted from.

Two women, in deep mourning, having nerved themselves to view that awesome spectacle, now sank, weeping, to the floor. Marguerite knew all that had occurred, for Coconnas had had word from

Caboche excusing his own failure, the same night La Mole was sentenced. Her heart expanded in both love and pity upon the unfortunate young man who had died needlessly—as far as she was concerned, but who had undoubtedly aided the cause of her husband.

When Charles had signed the warrant, he knew it was as though he signed his own : and in the desire to take his exit with dignity, he had ordered a fête at the Château of Vincennes. Here, in a blaze of pageantry and beauty, he hoped to spend his last moment, forgetful of the cruel massacre that had disordered him so thoroughly that often, with tears and groans, he bewailed the murder of his subjects.

His character, in keeping with the events of his reign—although these were in a measure due to the system that prompted and sanctioned them and to his mother, who made him instrumental in perpetrating atrocities—was cruel and perfidious ; yet the seed of good was blossoming within him, despite himself, and he repented, pitifully.

Thus, from the scene of death, the two bereaved ladies returned to a scene of revelry.

The château was noisy with preparations : Marguerite and Henrietta lay prostrate in the rooms of the former, and Charles, feeling his time short, at eight o'clock went to his sister.

A sad spectacle met his gaze, but in his ignorance he put it down to grief for himself.

Marguerite lay in a chair. " Why, Marguerite, you must not grieve." Henrietta, in the other room, heard his voice and composed herself.

Marguerite raised her eyes, then jumped up and flung her arms about her brother, weeping

passionately on his shoulder. Charles patted her affectionately. "Courage"—he whispered. "We all carry a Cross and must bear it to the end."

"Oh, my brother," sobbed Marguerite.

"Come, dress yourself for a grand occasion. I am a dying man and would pass out to sounds of revelry, not of weeping."

Marguerite stared at him in horror. "Dying," she whispered.

Charles ignored her. "Gillonne," he cried; "put out the Queen's finest gown and diamonds." Turning to his sister he put his arm about her. "Now, Marguerite, smile one of your sweet smiles for me, who will never smile again; then hasten and dress." Marguerite nodded, dumbly. A trembling smile lit up her face. Charles kissed her and slowly retired, and she stood like a statue staring at the closed door. God help all of them, she thought, and turned to find Henrietta beside her. The two clung together tearlessly, both white as alabaster.

"I must dress," said Marguerite; "but I pray you wait for me, and later we will go and say a prayer over those two fine fellows."

Henrietta nodded and, dismissing Gillonne, herself aided Marguerite in her task of banishing the signs of grief upon her face. Cream, rouge and powder were lavishly applied, and in a few moments a complete metamorphosis had been achieved. A brilliant figure, Marguerite stood in all her beauty, no trace remaining of the sorrow-stricken figure of a few moments before. She proceeded to the reception-room with stately step.

Upright in his throne, elegantly surrounded by all that luxury could bestow and being congratulated upon his firm handling of his attempted murderer,

sat Charles. He appeared, indeed, to be propped up, and it was only with the greatest effort he kept erect. In a dream the previous night he had seen a flock of ravens picking his bones while Death took his spirit to Hades.

A scornful smile was on his face ; in his dying, tear-stained eyes a contemptuous glance ; and in his heart the desire to get away from the gilded, scented crowd to die in peace. But he had made up his mind for a grand exit, and fate, in sparing him for it, was kind. He felt happy ; and as he noticed blood oozing from his hands, he hid them. Catherine should not know the end was so near, or she would send to Poland for that pampered son of hers.

He did not know that D'Anjou had already been warned by her and was within the city, a move that enabled him very shortly to seize the throne. He signed for Henry of Navarre to approach. De Guise, full of jealousy, yet resigned and ready to help, watched him as he bent before the King, who whispered : " You know, Harry, I am dying. Yes," as Navarre started. " Listen ! State policy controls events, not the King, remember ! "

" Sire, I only remember the regard I bear you."

" We must not let women rule a State ! I die without male heirs and would have you Regent. You alone are capable of governing, and I would protect you."

Henry, conscious of the gaze of Catherine over the heads of the laughing, unsuspecting guests, felt apprehensive and he trembled as she approached. Charlotte in the background, felt her heart throb with anxiety, while Marguerite—near by—wondered curiously what the two Kings were discussing. She continued to ignore the glance of her former lover,

while still reacting to his presence, for she knew now that De Guise had saved her own honour by not denouncing as hers the wax exhibit she had shudderingly recognized in the exhibition of articles produced at La Mole's trial—the miniature of her lover with her own initial on his breast and a pin through both to denote the pain of love that joined their hearts. She did not know if De Guise wondered if she herself had given it to La Mole as a love token, or if he knew that her mother had planted it—as she must have done: and frankly she hoped the former, so that De Guise might the sooner forget one whose feet were now set upon a path leading away from him. Her husband hesitated to reply to the King.

"You accept," said Charles urgently as Catherine came into view

"Yes," said Navarre, and turned to meet her.

Charles sat upright. "Madame, and the company, salute the Regent."

"What!" Catherine started. The company, from noisy inattention, became quietly attentive. D'Alençon, behind his mother, turned a sickly yellow and all made an attempt to salute.

"Here is the parchment which gives you control of the armies of France and all rights and power until the King of Poland returns, God knows when." Charles handed Henry a roll of documents and Catherine's knees trembled so much she scarce could stand. Her vindictive glance, beyond her own volition, sought the man who had brought her scheming to naught. Henry, secure in his power, relaxed his habitual caution. His menacing eyes returned her full glance and he murmured, "Your Master," holding up the parchment roll.

"A Valois can never give precedence to a Bourbon," she replied and lifted her head, proudly ; but tears of mortification stood in her eyes. God alone knew the lengths to which she had gone to preserve the Throne for her children, what sins she had upon her conscience thereby ; and here was Charles, who had benefited, calmly taking from her that which she had bestowed on him and handing it to her enemy. God preserve her, no one understood ! A gleam of triumph filled her when she reflected that Henry d'Anjou was closer at hand than any suspected. Not for long would the usurper benefit. She lowered her eyes. Let Navarre and Charles imagine they had gained the advantage—she would go and give orders that would successfully reverse it. Charles, conscious of the life-tide ebbing within his worn-out frame, took the hand of Navarre. "I have repaid," he whispered. "Forget the sins of the King and think pitifully of the man."

Henry clasped his hand. D'Alençon, near the sorrowful Marguerite, was biting his lip and wondering what the two were saying. If only he could scare Henry away, he himself would be King of France in the absence of his brother, D'Anjou—away in Poland !

The head of Charles fell back, bloody foam appeared about his mouth and a groan went up as he fell sideways upon the Throne.

"The King is dying." A universal whispering echoed through the room. Catherine stood beside the doctor who held the fluttering pulse, marking the last heart-beats of a monarch. She saw D'Alençon whisper to Navarre. Ha, her youngest son sought favour where he had previously conspired in superior fashion, she thought ; but was wrong.

"Listen," said D'Alençon, "my mother sent for D'Anjou some time ago. He will be here shortly. Would you stay and be murdered?"

"*Mon Dieu*, you are right. Catherine will continue to reign, through him."

Suddenly, Henry saw Charlotte making signs from near the door.

"The King is passing," cried the doctor: and the company dropped to knee to give a prayer to speed the departing soul. Catherine, taking De Guise by the hand, darted softly from the room. She had gone to summon De Nancey for the arrest of Navarre. She sent De Guise in one direction to find the Captain and herself hurried to the Armoury, but De Guise did not do her errand. He made his way to the notorious house, which increasingly knew him in his effort to leave Marguerite alone, for only thus could he achieve it.

In his heart he loved her more than ever, but he had sworn never to allow himself to trouble Marguerite and not willingly would he place on her the burden of her mother's power if she lost her husband.

No! Navarre was all right. He had made Marguerite happy: so much so that now she had never a word for her lover and betrayer. It was fitting they should go through life together, and if in this one act of renunciation he could re-establish himself in his own eyes, he was content. Marguerite should not be hurt again by him, no matter what she had done, for he was responsible for her moral deflections in having placed power before love.

Meanwhile, D'Alençon's warning is in his mind, Henry did likewise; he departed through the opposite doorway, the Baroness beside him. Straight

to the bedroom of Charlotte the two fled. She locked the outer door and spoke, quickly.

"You must fly. At once! The King of Poland is at hand."

"I know."

"You know. Who told you?"

"D'Alençon."

"But he knows nothing of it. Now, why—— Ah, it was a lie, but I should love to see his face when he finds he spoke truth. He desired you to fly so that he might claim the Throne in his brother's absence. Unconsciously, he has favoured you, my beloved," putting her arms about his neck. "Kiss me." They embraced, then she cried, "You must go at once. Fleet horses await you with De Mouy at the postern gate. Kiss me once again." They clung together in passionate farewell.

"I will return," said Navarre.

"God grant it. Gillonne, the King is ready." Gillonne came forth from the outer room, slid back the secret panel with which every room in every château was fitted, and stepped into the dark recess, a single taper in her hand.

It was a dangerous path she had to travel in leading Henry of Navarre to safety, but she did not falter. One last kiss and Henry followed her, the panel slid back into place and Charlotte darted out, returning to the death chamber just in time to see Catherine lead her soldiers among the few remaining guests.

"Arrest the King of Navarre," she cried and then saw, with amazement, that he was not present. She looked wildly around. Marguerite lay prostrate at the feet of the dead King, the doctor attending her. D'Alençon stood at the window, watching; and he cried out, "There he goes."

"Where," cried his mother, and dashing to the window she saw the figures of three men flying away on fleet horses. "Fire on them, fire," she shrieked; and D'Alençon smiled as, the window raised, the accompanying soldiers did her bidding, but without success.

"I say cease fire, Madame."

Catherine looked at him. "What do you mean, my son?" De Guise, she noted, was still absent.

"That I am King in the absence of my brother. It is for me to give orders." Catherine was check-mated. How could she hold the crown for her favourite if he did not appear. Hold it she would!

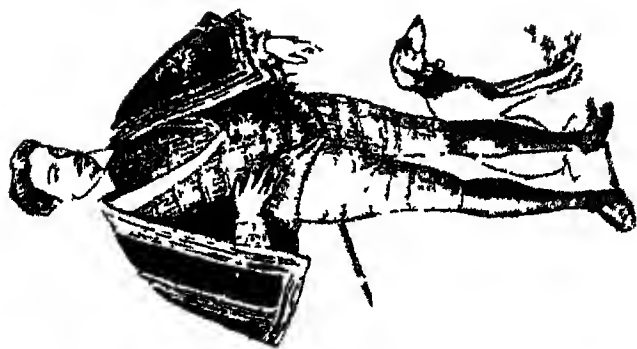
"My son, it distresses me to hear you talk of kingship with the King not cold. I——" She broke off as a tumult within the room warned her. "God be praised," she cried and, turning, held out her arms to a dusty, dishevelled figure who had burst in. "My son."

"Mother." Catherine and Henry d'Anjou embraced. "Am I in time?"

"Yes." M. de Nancey now solemnly broke in two the rod he carried. "King Charles IX is dead," he cried three times in a ringing voice: then dropped the broken pieces upon the floor.

Catherine's bosom heaved. "Long live Henry III, she cried, and linking her arm in Henry's led him from the room, followed by most of the company: those remaining including Marguerite in the arms of Charlotte, weeping, while the doctor performed the last sad rites upon a dead King.

D'Alençon, at the end of the procession, almost wept with mortification. "She has tricked me," he muttered, and swore. Alone at last in her room, Catherine knelt in thanksgiving. A peaceful light



DUKE OF ANJOU KING OF POI AND,
AND HENRY III OF FRANCE



KING CHARLES IX OF FRANCE

reflected in her face her serenity of soul and she smiled, gratefully yet pitifully, as she prayed : while her chief conspirator, De Guise, disloyal at the last for love of a woman, was trying to lose his unhappiness in wine, women and song. Mile by mile he visualized the journey of his rival and, picking up his glass, sparkling and bubbling, he gave a toast, " To Navarre," he cried, drank and flung away his glass—which splintered to atoms upon the oak floor. Then turning to the laughing ladies, he cried, " A heart to let : why waste the golden hours of youth, that come but once. What am I bid for my heart ? "

Immediately there fluttered about him the ribbons of innumerable pretty damsels and he knew that at least he could lose his sense of regret in other arms, though ever his mind would remember Marguerite—the woman for whom he turned traitor, for once, to his cause.

Farewell to Henry de Guise ; roystering soldier of fortune, brave man and human man, for he was loyal to greater things than he knew when he spared Henry of Navarre to France. Thus unselfishness can aid a cause more than mere personal gratifications, though the end may be lost in the dim obscurity of the future.

EPILOGUE

HENRY OF NAVARRE had made no plans when he joined De Mouy in a precipitous flight from Paris: he acted on the spur of the moment in the midst of uncertainty.

The psychic powers that warned him to fly saved his life, for Catherine was in such a condition as to have risked all for his head.

However, as they increased the distance between themselves and the sinister Queen the riders threw off depression and fear, and heartily they laughed until the silent stretches of country rang with their strident tones.

Ah, this was life; laughing, loving and flying in the face of death.

Who cared for plans; let the eternal fates decide each move in the game and leave plans to make themselves to-morrow: he had plenty of time for those once his head was safe. He would return, of course, to see his wife and Charlotte.

With the former he meant to discuss the question of jointly sharing the crown of Navarre, with the latter repeat the beautiful hours they had so often shared, if possible. In the meantime, there were other women.

Maureval was back at his post, almost well, De Mouy was fuming to return for his head; thus the threads of the tragedy needed but to be joined to complete the vicious circle.

Marguerite, with her friend, Henrietta, paid the secret visit to Caboche, and saw their two lovers laid ready for burial ; and in her heart she said farewell to love.

That night she reviewed her position and decided to throw in her lot with her husband.

No divorce or murder for her. Henry at least wore a crown, as once her mother had reminded her ; and she was in mood to benefit from it.

She awaited word from Henry with an anxiety only equalled by that of Charlotte ; while Catherine, acting regent to her beloved son Henry III, now reigned in quietude and peace. Henry had seen a great change in his mother, and guessed that her span of energetic life had almost run its course. He was a domineering and capricious King, but Catherine had not now the strength to over-ride him. He was crowned at Rheims with his wife, Louise de Vandeumont, by whom he had no children, and from his past life a brilliant reign might have been expected. He now developed an unpleasant personality, was vain in his personal appearance and painted his face like a woman of the Court : he slept with gloves on and stained his hair, devised new fashions in dress and diverted himself with lap-dogs and monkeys, while Catherine pursued her course down the stream of life, more quietly, and thankfully.

A year passed away and she forgot the alarms and horrors of those previous years in gratitude for the peace she had achieved.

One night, Maureval desired to see her. She smiled pleasantly upon him.

“ You are quite recovered, I see.”

“ Yes, Madame, but I have ill news. He is here.”

“ Whom ? ”

"Henry of Navarre."

"Oh!" Immediately a wave of fear swept her. "Why has he returned?" she cried, "why could he not leave us in peace?"

"Madame Suave is the magnet, Majesty."

"Where are they?"

"At the 'La Belle.'"

Catherine pondered. Could she catch both birds with one throw?

She sat down and penned a note to the Baron, informing him where his wife and her lover were to be found. She dismissed a page to take it to the Baron and commanded Maureval to take three men and apprehend Navarre, or if he resisted, kill him. The Baron would be blamed, and none could censure him in his revenge. As for Charlotte, she was Maureval's—to do with as he would.

Henry and Charlotte were saying farewell. Henry told her he was taking Marguerite back to Navarre with him, there to reign and there to stay for ever. "Oh my love, God go with you. Would that I could."

"Sweet Carlotta, ever shall I treasure your kindness in memory."

"Kiss me farewell," she whispered, tears in her eyes. "One last hour spent in your arms and I shall not repine. I shall watch your future; but for me there is no future."

"Come, let us be merry. Nothing lasts for ever."

"Only my love," she whispered, and flung herself into his embrace.

Downstairs in the shadow of the hotel, De Mouy and two other attendants waited, their eyes sharp. They saw a single line of soldiers creeping along the wall opposite and quickened to life.

The figures approached and with a start De Mouy recognized his enemy. A joyful cry at this greatly desired but unexpected chance burst from him.

"Maureval," he roared and drew his rapier.

Maureval started, then drew his pistol and they moved simultaneously. Maureval's ball flattened upon the wall. The rapier of De Mouy entered his body and inflicted a severe wound and his piercing cry rang out, frightening his followers engaged with the two other Huguenots, Saucourt and Barthelemy. They saw their Captain fall; De Mouy sprang like a lion toward them and they fled for help.

Maureval, momentarily forgotten, got to his feet; Navarre, aroused by the cry, sprang from the window and attacked him. De Mouy returned to the attack. "At him," cried Henry, and De Mouy beat Maureval to his knees. The soldiers now came running back, with two others. "Help! Fire!" cried Maureval.

"Die, murderer and assassin," cried De Mouy, and plunged his sword violently through the breast of the Captain, who fell back. De Mouy now became engaged with two soldiers, Henry with another, the other two Huguenots the remaining two.

Three were despatched, the remaining two fled and Henry cried: "Come, we must be gone." He looked up at the window and blew a kiss to Charlotte: De Mouy bent over Maureval, to make sure he was dead and received the discharge from the pistol of the dying man, whose last effort was to cost a life.

De Mouy died instantly, falling across the body of his foe. Henry, after a last sorrowful look, became aware of several onlookers attracted by the noise. These were held at bay by his two friends, so Henry darted to the yard and mounted his horse.

Leading the two others, he returned ; the two men mounted and all three sped like the wind to the secret rendezvous that had been arranged with Marguerite. Here she awaited her husband, having been warned by a note sent through Charlotte and with the spirit of adventure quelling doubts she had allowed Gillonne to assist her in packing up her jewels in a bundle carried on the pommel of her saddle.

She was eagerly awaiting her husband's arrival—her horse ready saddled near by : and in a moment she was away, joined in the swift ride for freedom and home that to her life's end she was never to forget.

An exile, she hoped that the years to come would weld her close to the husband riding close to her side : but alas, she knew not what was in store. They rode, stirrup to stirrup, under a calm and lovely sky, while Charlotte faced a madman.

The appearance of her husband frightened Charlotte. The baron's trembling hands closed about her throat and he hissed :

“ Ha, where is your lover ? ”

“ What do you mean ? Are you mad ? ”

“ Don't try and fool me, woman. Where is he ? ”

“ You can see for yourself there is no one here.”

The Baron threw her to the floor then satisfied himself they were, indeed, alone and drawing out a dagger cried, “ 'Tis fortunate for you, or this had tasted your heart's blood.”

He suddenly sank upon the divan, an old man and a weary, and Charlotte, full of remorse, knelt at his feet, saying, “ Let us be friends.” He stared at her with eyes full of wonder, and saw the weeping child looking out of her eyes. His anger fell away and he gave and received pity in the ensuing moments.

"Charlotte, I am an old fool. 'Tis you who should forgive me. Will you? I am an old man and have not long to live."

"Oh. Let us forgive each other." She wept, there at his knee and he stroked her head. "Come, let us go home," he said.

Hand in hand they left the room and as they came out saw the bodies being carried away.

Farewell to Charlotte. Her husband died in 1574 and after having been the mistress of the King of Poland and the Duc d'Alençon she married François de La Trenvouille, Marquis de Noirmoutier—and spent happy years with him till she died herself, in 1617.

The Abbé Gondi owed to Catherine a rapid rise in the Church. He became Archbishop of Paris, and finally Cardinal, and was entrusted with various missions by the King, Henry III. His relative, the Comte de Gondi, a close friend of Charles IX, as predicted by Cosmo Ruggieri—the noted horoscope reader and physician to Catherine's father—followed him to the tomb.

The King proved wilful of his mother's advice and was cordially hated for as many years as he reigned. This increased towards the end, especially for his causing the assassination in 1588 of De Guise, who, having called to see Catherine, was ambuscaded in the corridor by the bodyguard of the King, with whom he had quarrelled, and stabbed to death by Montlhery. His body was taken to the cellars and buried in quicklime—that had consumed so many bodies secretly conveyed there.

The Prince de Condé was poisoned just prior to this event.

De Guise was deeply regretted by the dying

Catherine, who, thirteen days later, on January 5th, 1589, passed away at the Château of Blois.

Eight months later Henry III was stabbed, as an impious tyrant, by a monk—Jaques Clement, a Dominican friar, who obtained admittance to Henry at St. Cloud on the plea of presenting letters.

While Henry opened them, the monk stabbed him in the pit of the stomach : the King cried out he was stabbed, pulled out the knife and struck at Clement, who was quickly killed by the attendants. The King lingered two days and summoned Henry of Navarre, whom he embraced and declared his successor ; his own brother, the Duc de Alençon, having died in 1584.

Henry III was buried, first at Compeigne and afterward at St. Denis : thus Henry of Navarre became Henry IV of France and returned to the scene of his fear and terror a great Monarch. He issued an edict for toleration of the Huguenots while confirming the privileges and power of the Catholic Church, and freed France from external and internal war.

He greatly improved Paris and promoted the arts and manufacture, built the Pont Neuf, and enlarged the Royal Palace. He unfortunately fostered duelling, whereby hundreds lost their lives, and prior to his death, by stabbing, in 1610, made full use of his kingly prerogatives.

He quickly gave rein to his amorous disposition, and Marguerite found herself rivalled and superseded by his mistress, Gabrielle d'Estrees, Duchess of Beaufort, who bore him four children, the eldest of whom was Monsieur the Duc de Vendôme, new owner of Anet ; while she was barren.

Henry made this the excuse for divorcing

Marguerite, and he married Marie-de-Medicis, daughter of the Grand Duke of Florence, after the death of Gabrielle.

Marguerite retired to the Château of Madrid, where her brother had reared wild beasts to combat bulls : and there reflected on happy days gone by. She dreamed of happiness she had known, memories of which sweetened her seclusion ; and in her dreams she lived over again the first and greatest love of her life, for De Guise, and awoke crying for his untimely end. Her soul reached out into the unknown to make contact with his, and of all the ghosts that haunt the Louvre—the scene of bliss or unhappy lamentation to so many—we may be sure that these two wander there, arm in arm, in those chambers which the lovely Marguerite occupied in her lifetime, and taste again the ghostly counterpart of sweet, clinging kisses.

While she lived the memory of their love lightened her sad seclusion, so that she found life not unbearable.

She was friendly with Marie-de-Medicis and glad of the happiness she gave Henry IV : was greatly respected and on her death, in 1615, sadly mourned.

Marie Touchet was the daughter of Jean Touchet—the Lord of Beauvais and Le Quillard, King's Counsellor and Lieutenant of the Bailiwick of Orleans. Catherine had encouraged her connection with Charles because she presented no competition to herself and kept the King from politics. Marie's son by Charles was recognized by Catherine, who persuaded Parliament to acknowledge him : and Marie herself, after the death of Charles IX, wed Charles de Balzac, Marquis d'Entragues, Governor

of Orleans—by whom she had two daughters, one of whom became the mistress of Henry IV.

So, on the panoramic screen of life, the figures of three women—each distinctive yet sharing the common bond of sisterhood—came, in all the splendour of youth and power, and passed, each into her destined niche, bravely and pathetically.

Life takes us all and moulds us in a fashion vastly different from what we dream in our inexperience and ignorance of life and its pitfalls : so that in later years we scarce can be recognized for that which we were. *Lord, we know what we are, but know not wh*^m

Beautiful aspirations, noble dreams and all the idealism of passionate youth, blend with the deeper, richer and more varied currents of real life, of worldly life—where, in the turmoil of existence, dreams can be shattered, aspirations rent and idealism be brought low.

Whatever comes must be borne, philosophically, as part of our strict training in this stage of eternal life, and with the courage that arms the soul to withstand inroads upon our physical body. Thus, happen what may to the latter, the soul remains intact and inviolate and in turn wings its way to God, the Creator, in gladness and supplication. Thus may sinner and saint share a benediction and a blessing and so may meet in the high heaven these sinners and those with whom and for whom they sinned.

God forgive us all and pardon those Three Women.